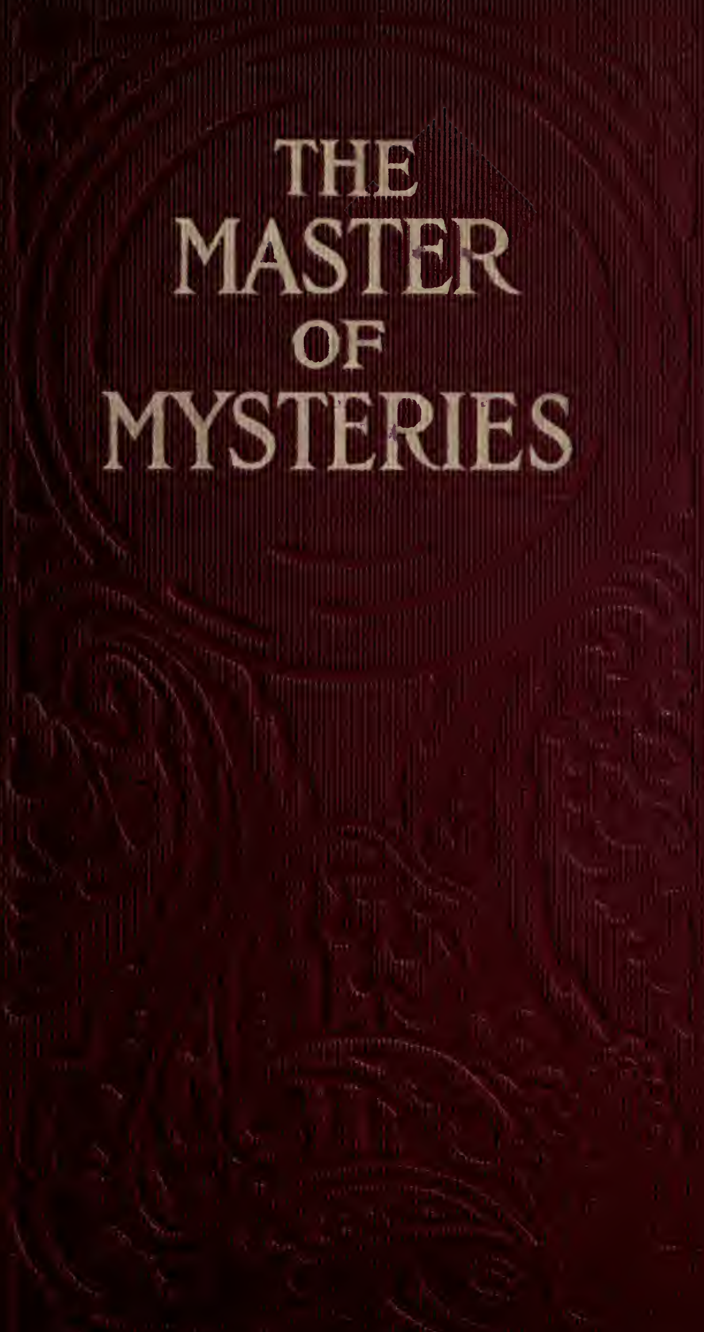

THE MASTER OF MYSTERIES

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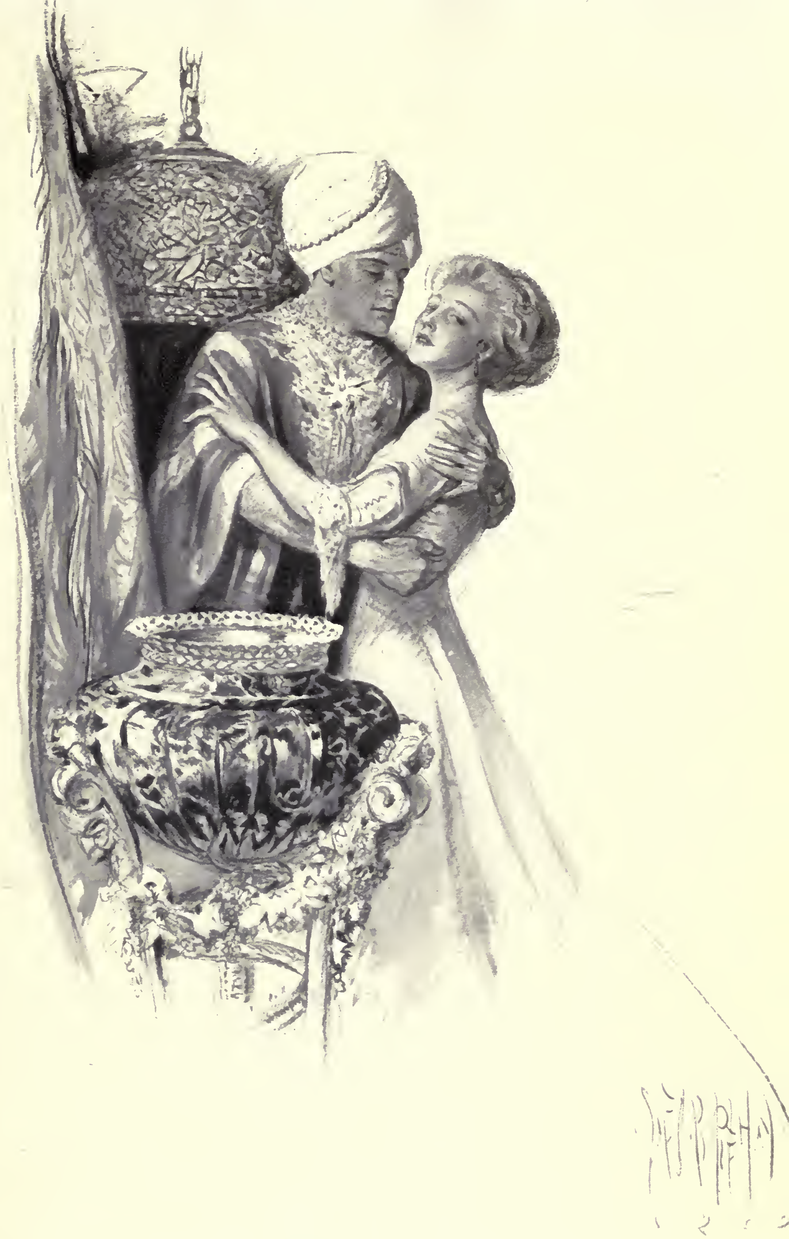

"I'd know then just what you were to me—alone in the dark."

THE
MASTER OF MYSTERIES

BEING AN ACCOUNT OF THE PROBLEMS
SOLVED BY ASTRO, SEER OF SECRETS,
AND HIS LOVE AFFAIR WITH VALESKA WYNNE, HIS ASSISTANT

Harold's Huntly Neill.

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY
KARL ANDERSON AND GEORGE BREHM

from

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INTRODUCTION

Astro put *The Great Cryptogram* back upon his book-shelf among the other attempts to solve the immortal Shakespeare-Bacon controversy.

"Valeska," he said, turning to his pretty assistant, "it's queer that there appears to be no other book containing a secret message except the Shakespeare folios, isn't it! It seems to me that I have heard it said that Chatterton had a cipher in one of his books, though; that's the only other one I know of. Strange more authors haven't done it!"

"Why?" Valeska asked, looking up from her catalogue. "Why should a writer put anything in that can't go plainly in the body of the book, or, at least, in an introduction?"

"For many reasons: He may be ashamed of the book, or have some other reason for not acknowledging its authorship. It may describe his friends too accurately. It may reveal important secrets. Even if his name does appear on the title page, I can imagine of a number of secret messages he might want to insert for the benefit of those able to understand it."

"Perhaps it has often been done," Valeska suggested. "One wouldn't know, unless one had a reason to suspect the existence of such a thing—and then one would have to be clever enough to read the cipher."

Astro thought it over. "By Jove!" he exclaimed at last, "you're right! Now I think of it there's one particular book, published anonymously, that I've often been curious about. *Clewfinder,*—I think I'll take a look at it."

He went to his book-shelves again and took out the volume, opened it, and ran swiftly over the pages. "Let's see," he said; "if the author wanted his true name known, he would put it in an easy cipher, wouldn't he? But if he didn't want it found out easily, it would be something more complex. This book has had a great sale—it could hardly hurt the man to be suspected of writing it. Let's try the easiest possible method first."

He ran swiftly over the pages. "Well, what d'you think!" he said, looking up. "I knew the man was pretty clever, and fairly versatile, but I never thought of him as the author of such a novel as *Clewfinder!* Just look at it, Valeska."

"You say it's the easiest possible method he has taken?" Valeska said, as she looked over the pages.

"The very easiest."

Valeska studied on it a few minutes, then her face lighted. She hurriedly turned the pages, stopped here and there, and then smiled. "Well, that *is* a surprise, isn't it! But why didn't he put his name on the title page? I can't understand that!"

"Give me the book!" Astro said, eagerly. "I believe he would be likely to tell that, too!" He took the volume again, and again he ran hurriedly over the pages. "Yes; as I thought," he said, finally. "He has the best of reasons." He handed the book back to his assistant.

"The second cipher, surely, would be written in the second easiest way, shouldn't it?"

Astro nodded. "Naturally."

Valeska sat for a while at her table, her head resting in her hand. Then she slowly turned the leaves, thinking. In a moment she went faster, stopping as before, for a second, occasionally. She went back once, made sure, and recommenced. Finally she smiled. "Yes!" she said. "He's right, too!"

"It may have a third cipher message, too," she suggested, looking at the volume curiously.

Astro thought it over. "Possibly, but that would be for the few, not for the ordinary 'smarty-cats.' I'll see when I have leisure for it. It will probably take a little more time to read it."

"Well," said Valeska, "if other books have contained any such secret messages, it's strange that some one hasn't eventually discovered them."

"That's no doubt because they didn't have modern publishers, who understood the practical psychology of advertising," said Astro.

And he turned to play with his pet white lizard.

THE MASTER OF MYSTERIES

The Master of Mysteries

MISSING JOHN HUDSON

THE Master of Mysteries bent over the onyx lectern for a moment to gaze at the monograph, and then chuckled derisively. "Oh, these German Symbolists!" he said half aloud. "For unadulterated humor, give me a Teuton that has joined the ranks of the metaphysicians. It is hardly to be wondered that ninety per cent. of them have died in madhouses, and that Max Nordau has scheduled the rest of them for suicide!"

He paused again to give a final glance at Ehrenfeld's little book on tone color in vowels. "The letter A," he translated rapidly, "suggests at once bright red, and symbolizes youth, or joy; the letter I is suggestive of sky-blue, and symbolizes intimacy, or love—*et cetera, et cetera.*" He stopped from sheer exasperation. "Poor Arthur Rimbaud! Poor old sodden Verlaine! What crimes are committed in your cause!"

The door opened softly, and he turned to greet a beautiful blond-haired girl who entered.

"Valeska, if I were making up a list of the tonal essences in vowel sounds, I should say the A was yellow, in disagreement with our friend here, Mr. Ehrenfeld. The U would be purple, verging on maroon. By the way, did you happen to notice that woman who was here this afternoon?" He gazed abstractedly at the floor. "It seemed to me," he went on after a few moments' thought, "as if she possessed distinctly purple vibrations, denoting unrest."

"Which one?" was the quick reply. "The one in black satin, with jet ornaments, who wore gold-bowed eye-glasses, and limped?"

"Of course; but I should describe her as a woman who was worried and was jealous of her husband; very suspicious of him; also abnormally anxious for money."

"I didn't talk to her; I was too busy."

"You must do a few palms some day, just to see how you are getting along in your study of the science of human nature. You noticed nothing else about her?"

Valeska put the end of her pencil to her lips and considered it abstractedly for a few moments. "Let me see—" she began. "She carried two books, didn't she?"

"Precisely. One was a Baedeker's *Northern Italy,* and the other was a church report,—Park Avenue Presbyterian. But the point is that she's coming here again, possibly this evening or to-morrow. She was literally perishing with the desire to ask me something which she did not dare to at the time."

At this moment there came a ring at the office door-bell.

"There she is now," went on the mystic. "Did you notice that was a nervous ring? It came twice. She wasn't quite sure the first time whether she had pressed hard enough. Show her in, Valeska."

A few minutes intervened before his visitor appeared, pausing undecidedly on the threshold. "Could

I see you for a short time about something of importance?" she questioned.

"Have a seat, madam." Astro had risen, and placed a chair, apparently innocently enough, where the full glare of the drop electric light would illuminate her. His eyes did not appear to survey his client; but under his long lashes they were busy noting detail after detail. She sat down and again hesitated to begin.

"I—I suppose that what I am about to say, sir, will be kept in perfect confidence?"

"Assuredly, madam. You are worried about your husband, I presume."

She started in surprise, looked curiously at him, and then said, "Yes," in a faint tremulous whisper. At once she added, "You told me things this afternoon which were so wonderfully true that I thought I might trust you to give me some help on a far more important affair which has been worrying me for some time. The fact is, Mr. Hudson, my husband, has disappeared. I haven't seen him for over a week."

At this Astro manifested no surprise, and merely remarked, "I was aware that he was away, madam, when I read your palm this afternoon. No doubt I can find him, if that is what you wish; but it may take some time; for I shall have to gaze into my crystals and go into a trance. It will also be necessary for me to go to your house—into his room, in fact—in order that I may first take his atmosphere."

"Oh, I understand," she exclaimed. "To tell the truth, I'm very, very much worried, and anxious to have you go to work as soon as possible. I daren't go to the police; for, after all, there may be nothing serious the matter, and it would cause a lot of talk; and I shouldn't want him ever to know that I'd employed a detective for anything like this. But of course you are different."

"I am 'different', as you say," responded Astro, smiling. "I shall be able to trace him, no doubt, without any one ever suspecting me. Just when did you see him for the last time?"

"On Tuesday, the tenth."

"And now it is the twentieth. He has had no business troubles?"

"On the contrary, he was doing remarkably well in his real estate business. We've been saving up to go abroad, you see; it has been a plan we've had ever since we were married. It's a sort of delayed honeymoon, I suppose. We hoped to live in Italy for a year." She sighed.

"You are a church-member, I presume?"

"Yes, I go to the Park Avenue Presbyterian church. Mr. Hudson is a deacon there."

"I see. He is well-off, you say?"

"Oh, no; not that. But we have been quite encouraged of late. Mr. Hudson was quite hopeful about our European trip."

"Very well, Mrs. Hudson; I shall be at your house at nine o'clock to-morrow."

Valeska entered the room again as soon as the visitor had left, and looked at the palmist, with a question in her eyes.

Astro waved his hand carelessly. "As I thought," he began, turning to his narghile, lighting it, and blowing the fumes through his nose luxuriously, "John

Hudson has disappeared. She asked several pointed questions about him this afternoon, although she thought that she guarded herself well. They are both church-members, and their ambition is to go abroad. He is in the real estate business. Can you put two and two together?"

Valeska's pretty eyebrows creased themselves in thought. "Let me see. Judging from her appearance, they can't have been making very much money in the real estate business. You say they wanted to go to Europe,—wanted to stay a year in Italy, wasn't it?—and wanted all this badly. He'd naturally try to get the money in other ways; perhaps illegitimately. It might even lead him into crime. Being religious, he would naturally want to hide this from his wife. Perhaps he has been suspected and has escaped." She looked up at him anxiously.

"You're improving," said the Seer impassively. "In fact, that's just what I've been thinking myself. What we must find out is, what crime, if any, he has committed. Perhaps he is dead; perhaps he has run away with another woman. We must consider every possibility. Now, I can't very well take you up to the Hudson house, as this is a delicate case; so I wish you'd go over all the newspapers since the tenth and see what you can find that will help us."

At ten o'clock next day Astro appeared in his psychic studio, where appointments with his fashionable clients kept him till two in the afternoon. At that time he called Valeska into his favorite corner of the studio where he did his lounging and studying.

"Well," he asked, "what did you get out of the newspapers?"

"I found so much that it's worse than if I'd found nothing at all,—several murders, an elopement, and a bank robbery. I don't see how any of them help, though. The criminals all seem to be known. Perhaps Hudson was an accomplice."

"My dear girl, never go on general principles; general principles are the refuge of the hopelessly incompetent and inane. If you will follow general principles long enough, you will find yourself in a class that is unlimited in its generalities and hidebound in its principles. If there is no significant detail that dovetails into Hudson's disappearance, we'll simply have to go about it in another way. You will be better able to judge when I tell you what happened this forenoon before I came down to the studio here.

"Mrs. Hudson was ready for me with the news that she had found her husband's check-book, and that it showed him to have an unexpected deposit in the bank of some six thousand dollars. Then she showed me into the bedroom; but as they shared this apartment I thought it unnecessary to look there for anything significant. Hudson's own den was a bare office-like sort of place, small, and furnished with a leather couch, a bookcase, and an old office desk. In this, all the drawers were unlocked except one. I got Mrs. Hudson's permission to pick that lock, and here is what I found." He smiled. "Of course, you understand these were absolutely necessary for me to get my vibrations."

They both laughed at the remark, and he took from his pocket several articles, which he laid upon the table. There were, first, two advertising pictures posed by a pretty woman; evidently the same model in each instance, though used in connection with different products. In one pose the girl held a loaf of bread in her hand; in the other she displayed her gleaming teeth whitened by "Dentabella," a new proprietary toothpaste. She was pretty and quite young. Next was a card, curiously covered with an intricate series of interlaced curves in purple ink,—a beautiful, symmetrical pattern, as accurately drawn as the lathe engraving on a bank-note. Last, there was a small printed page containing a calendar with all the months given. Oddly enough, the year was not printed at the top; instead, above the calendar proper appeared the caption, "Number fourteen."

Valeska looked at the collection curiously. "Well," she said at last, "I can't make much of anything except the girl's picture. It looks to me as if Hudson must have some special interest in her, to have two pictures of the same woman. We might find out who she is."

"That's important, surely; unless, of course, we can get hold of a better clue. But do you know what this is?" He held up the card.

"No, it looks to me like a fairy's lace handkerchief design or a sea-shell."

"That is a harmonic curve," said Astro. "Sometimes it's called a vibration curve, and it is traced by a compound or twin elliptic pendulum."

"What's that? I am getting farther away than ever."

"Suppose," continued Astro, "you tie one end of a string to a nail in the ceiling, while the other end is looped up to another nail, also in the ceiling. Now, from the lower point of this V, hang a string with a weight on the end. You observe, the weight will be at the end of a Y, and if you give a rotary motion to the compound pendulum so formed, the weight will travel in an intricate but regular curve, dependent on the relative lengths of the two parts of the pendulum as it swings forward and backward and right and left at the same time. This curve was made by such a one, only more complicated, and arranged so as to trace a line on a plane surface. The curves so formed, curious to say, correspond actually to the musical vibrations of various chords."

"It's interesting, but rather intricate, and I don't see how it helps us much with Hudson," said Valeska. "How about this calendar, and what's the 'Number fourteen' for?"

"That," said the Master of Mysteries, "is a page from a universal calendar; that is, a calendar that can be used for any year. This is the last page of the pamphlet, as it takes just fourteen different diagrams to include all the calendar possibilities,—seven different diagrams in which the year begins on a different day of the week, and another set of seven for the leap years. There's a list in front, probably giving the number of the diagram to be used for each individual year."

"Oh!" exclaimed the girl. "That reminds me, now. I did see something about a 'two-hundred-year calendar'. Where was it? Let me think. Yes, I have it. It was in an account of a body that was found drowned. Stupid of me to overlook that! I'll see if I can find it."

"Get it," Astro said, "while I think this over."

She flew to her file and began to go hurriedly through the sheets of paper. "Here it is! Here it is!" she cried. Then she read breathlessly:

> "The body of an unknown man was found this morning floating in the East River near Thirty-eight Street. The corpse was that of a man of fifty-five or sixty years, and had evidently been in in the water some ten days. The lower part of the face was completely covered by a full beard. The body was dressed in a black diagonal cutaway coat and striped trousers, and was doubtless that of a gentleman in reduced circumstances. In the trousers pocket was found a bunch of keys, a small sum of money, and a two-hundred-year calendar. No marks indicating foul play were discovered on the body, which is awaiting identification at the morgue."

"That corresponds in a general way with the description of Hudson that his wife gave me," said Astro. "She had no photograph of him taken within the last twenty years. There's a chance that it may be he, in which case it looks to me like murder; but I'll have to go down to the morgue and see, anyway, on account of the calendar. I think you'd better let me do that alone, while you try to discover something about this 'Dentabella' girl. Come back here as soon as you have located her."

No one would have recognized in the smart, stylishly dressed man who emerged from the studio a half-hour later, the languid picturesque Master of Mysteries, Astro the Seer. He walked briskly along, his eyes eager and alert to every impression. At the morgue he had no difficulty in obtaining permission to view the remains of the man he sought, and to inspect the clothing and the articles that had been found in the pocket.

The body was that of a middle-aged man of benevolent appearance, the face showing weakness rather than resolution in its features. The hands were delicately shaped, with pointed slender fingers. He had been apparently a dreamer, a mystic, rather than a man of vigorous life and practical affairs. Astro turned to inspect the articles displayed before his gaze. The two-hundred-year calendar which had been mentioned in the newspaper corresponded exactly to the page found in Hudson's desk; and on opening it he found that page twenty-nine, containing table number fourteen, had been torn out. What was more remarkable, however, was the fact that with it was a collection of water-soaked, purple-stained cards. Each contained a "harmonic curve", such as had been found in Hudson's drawer. One such coincidence was unusual. Two pointed conclusively to some connection between the two men; if, indeed, the corpse were not that of Hudson himself.

This point, however, was soon settled. Calling up Mrs. Hudson, he found that her husband's hair was scant and brown. The hair of the dead man was strong, slightly curly, and reddish. It was not Hudson.

Astro walked slowly home, plunged in thought, and looked neither to the right nor the left as he advanced. A block before he reached his studio he stopped stock-still for a moment, gazing in front of him; then, with a quick turn, he walked rapidly back, took a cross-town car, and got off at Second Avenue. Along this he hurried till he came to a second-hand bookstore, where on one of the stands outside the window, there was a collection of pamphlets and magazines. He ran his eye over the names: *The Swastika, Universal Brotherhood, Vibrations, The New Wisdom,* and *Cosmos.* He took up one of these and turned to the advertising pages in the rear; then he tried another. It was not till he had read through the *Swastika* that he was satisfied and smiled. He paid for the copy, hailed a passing cab, and was driven to his studio, where Valeska was already waiting for him.

He announced to her at once that the dead man was not Hudson, and gave a brief description of the latter, whereupon she told Astro the story of her own search.

"I didn't find the girl; but I traced her antecedents. First I went to the advertising manager of the 'Dentabella' company, and told him I wanted to get hold of the model he had used in the ad. Finally I wheedled her name out of him—it was Agnes Vivian—and went up to the Harlem address he gave me. The young lady, however, no longer lived there; but I got the woman of the house to talking and found out that our little friend had left without settling her bill. So I intimated that I was looking for Miss Vivian to pay her some money I had borrowed, and in this way got the landlady to tell me everything she could that would help me to locate the missing girl. She had been posing for photographers; but now it seems as if she had got another job. At all events, a gentleman answering to Hudson's description had called on her several times, with the result that one day she had left and had never come back. She had sent for her trunk next day; but the landlady would not let it go, and could not ascertain where it was to be taken. She had an idea, though, that the girl was working on East Thirty-ninth Street somewhere; for she had overheard her telephoning one day previous to her departure. So you see," Valeska concluded, "our friend Hudson has probably left his wife for good and all; or rather for evil, perhaps."

"We'll soon find out," said Astro. "We'll go up and call on him this afternoon."

"What! Have you found out where he is already?"

"I'm inclined to think he's living, temporarily at least, at 198 East Thirty-ninth Street."

"With that girl?" Valeska's eyes blazed.

"Not at all. The only trouble with him is that he loves his wife too much."

Valeska still stared. "That isn't likely,—there are very few men like that nowadays. But I'm very much relieved; for I rather liked the Vivian girl's face; it's attractive."

"Yes," Astro assented, "and Hudson is paying her to be attractive. He has a good business head, this man Hudson. But we must find out first what is the cause of the death of Professor Dove."

"Why, who is he?"

"He is the man whose body is now lying in the morgue."

"How did you find that out?"

"Look at this," said Astro. He pointed to an advertisement in *The Swastika:*

> LET ME HELP YOU!
>
> Get into your own Vibration; develop your latent faculties, inherent possibilities; and develop your power, health, success, beauty, and love. Send 50c with name and birth date for trial reading and Vibratory Curve. Prof. Dove, 198 East 39th-St., N. Y.

"And that's what those curves are for, then?" Valeska asked.

"Well, that's what Professor Dove used them for; to mystify his dupes; or, by the looks of him, it's more than likely that he believed in them himself."

"Hudson must have believed in them too, then," she remarked, "or he wouldn't have been keeping them in his desk drawer. Was he a dupe, do you think?"

"You'll recall that Hudson had several of them in his possession. If he had had only one, I'd say he might have been a dupe."

"But what if he did have several?" queried Valeska. "Do you think Hudson murdered the professor?"

"Ah, my dear, that's what I'd like to know myself. I propose that we call at the Vibratory office, or whatever they call it. You see, I doubt if Professor Dove ever had six thousand dollars, or even six thousand cents; he was not worth murdering for his money. One thing is certain, Hudson didn't murder Miss Vivian; and I'm glad of that, for I'd really like to see her. Suppose we go up to Thirty-ninth Street and find out what sort of place it is."

As they walked across town the Master of Mysteries said, "That's a very clever graft, that vibration curve business. The more I think of it, the more I like it. You see, as there are two adjustments,—the length of the upper and the length of the lower pendulum,—you can get an infinite number of vibrations, and consequently an infinite number of curves. Therefore, you can attach any significance you please to the ratio between the two. Suppose, for instance, you divide off the top arm—that corresponds to the upper part of the Y—into inches, and call each inch a certain year. Then divide the lower arm in a similar way into days; say these are eighths of an inch each. If you set your compound pendulum to the two marks—any day and any year—you can produce a curve for any birthday you please, and you can always reproduce it to order. It's a very good plan to have some sort of scientific basis for this kind of thing, on account of the inquisitiveness of the post-office authorities. If you simply have a set of form letters for answers, the chances are that you'll have a fraud order against you and you'll not get your mail—with its desirable money-orders and stamp enclosures."

"And the calendar?"

"Merely to tell easily what day of the week any birthday fell on. For instance, December 22, 1883, was on a Saturday, and so on."

"What I am most interested in is the life readings," said the girl, "and the advice on how to acquire beauty."

"Or love?" Astro added, with a smile.

"I'll try to do that myself. It's more exciting."

From across the street the two now reconnoitered number 198. Below, at the musty stairway, appeared, among other signs, the legend, "Prof. Dove, Astrologer." It was already growing dark, and above, in a window on the third floor, a dim light appeared. The shade was drawn.

"I'm going to investigate more closely," said Astro. "You wait outside here and watch the window. If I raise the shade, come up!"

So saying, he crossed, and ascended the stairs. As he reached the landing, however, he met a young woman coming down, who, at a glance, proved to be the Miss Vivian of the "Dentabella" advertisements. Astro stood still in front of her, barring the way.

"Would you please tell me where Professor Dove is?" he inquired.

"Why, I—I don't know, I'm sure." She looked him up and down curiously.

"Then would you mind telling me where I can find Mr. John Hudson?"

Still she showed no sign of surprise; but drew herself up proudly. "There's no such person in this building that I know of," she asserted.

"I thought I had seen you in Professor Dove's office," continued the crystal-gazer suavely.

Something in his manner now seemed to alarm her. "Indeed! I'm a stranger here. You must be mistaken, really."

"You have never heard of Mr. Hudson?" he went on.

"What right have you to question me in this way?" she demanded boldly; and yet, oddly enough, she did not try to pass him.

"I have the right for two reasons. First, because the post-office is very curious as to the nature of concerns doing a mail-order business, and second, because the police would very much like to know something more concerning the death of Professor Dove."

She scarcely stopped to hear the rest of the sentence before she turned and ran up-stairs. Astro, though he bounded after her in a moment, was a moment too late; for the door was slammed and locked in his face.

"The police!" he heard her cry, and at once there was a commotion in the room. A window was thrown up hurriedly; then all became still. He waited in patience, listening intently. The first sound audible, however, came from the stairway beneath him. Assured that some one was coming up, he turned and saw Valeska beckoning frantically. He tiptoed to her, and she whispered:

"He climbed out through the window into that of the next house! Can't we catch him there?"

"We'll have to, or lose the whole game!" he cried. "It was a bit premature; but perhaps it will be as well, after all. Come along, and—look out for trouble. I'll have to bluff it out now, though I have no desire to impersonate a police officer,—that's a dangerous game. But we must hurry."

In an instant more they were down-stairs and hidden in the entrance of the next building. They had not long to wait. A man, bareheaded and excited, came running down, and would have dashed by, had not Astro's hand immediately clutched him.

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Hudson," said the Master of Mysteries, "but I wish to ask you a few questions."

"Who are you?" The man's voice was full of anxiety.

"A friend," said Astro.

Valeska put out her hand and took that of the frightened old man. "Don't be alarmed, Mr. Hudson. Really you are quite safe with us."

He gazed at her in dull astonishment. "What do you want, anyhow?" he exclaimed peevishly, attempting to recover a bold front, though his face was haggard with terror.

"I've found all I really want," Astro replied quietly; "but at the same time I'd like to have my curiosity gratified. What, for instance, do you know concerning the death of Professor Dove?"

Hudson started, and stared in the young man's face. "What! Is he dead? When did he die?"

"He died at about the same time you disappeared from home."

Hudson turned white. "Great God! You don't suspect me of—anything?"

"I'd like to have you explain a few things, that's all," was the quiet response.

"Who are you?" The old man had pulled himself together now, and was more defiant.

"My dear sir," said the Seer calmly, "I am one who has been sent by your wife to discover your whereabouts. As I said, that mission is now accomplished. At the same time you must admit that the circumstances in which I find you are suspicious. You have just escaped from Professor Dove's office, and Professor Dove now lies unidentified in the morgue. You are in possession of a considerable sum of money, recently acquired. You are, moreover, found in the company of a very pretty young woman. Surely all this will interest Mrs. Hudson. It remains for you to say how much of it I shall report."

Hudson trembled violently and put his face in his hands. "Oh, my God! you mustn't tell her! You can't! I'm innocent of any crime, so help me God! Wait! Come up to the office, and I'll explain it all."

Astro and Valeska retraced their steps in company with the fugitive, and soon found themselves before the office door. All was dark. Hudson gave three knocks, paused, and then delivered another. The door was opened silently. Miss Vivian stood before them in a dim light. At sight of the two strangers she staggered back.

"Oh!" she cried in alarm. "Are you arrested, Mr. Hudson?"

"I don't know," he answered childishly as he turned up the light.

There was a litter of papers strewn upon the office floor. A long table was piled with letters opened and unopened; there was a typewriter on a stand, a copying-press, a high desk with ledgers, and in a corner, suspended from hooks in the ceiling, the compound pendulum that Astro had described. On the horizontal shelf, fixed to the end of the pendulum, was a white card; and, extending from a table near by, an arm carrying a glass pen projected so that, when the pendulum was swung, a curve in purple ink was traced on the card. A heavy weight depended from the bottom of the instrument.

Hudson sunk into a chair and groaned. The girl waited without a word, watching him.

Then Valeska approached him. "Mr. Hudson," she said gently, "pray don't take it all so hard. I'm sure that you are innocent, and we'll both help you. If you tell us everything, we can find some way of saving you."

He raised his head and looked at Astro, who nodded in confirmation. Hudson took courage. "The first thing, the most important thing, of course, is to explain about Professor Dove's death. I have no idea how it occurred. Indeed, I didn't know he was dead until you told me. I suspected that something fatal had happened; but I knew nothing definite."

"When did you see him last?"

"Two weeks ago, but Miss Vivian has seen him since then."

The girl took it up. "It was here in this office that I saw him. He was intoxicated, and he frightened me;

so I went out and telephoned to Mr. Hudson about it. Then, when I got back, the professor had gone."

"You will understand," hastily explained Hudson, "that Professor Dove, when in his right mind, was a most gentlemanly and kind-hearted man; but when he was drunk there was no doing anything with him. I have had several unpleasant experiences with him before. He'd go out and wander all over the town in a sort of daze, talking aloud to himself about his psychic beliefs and all that. He was especially fond of the river, and once we found him sitting away out on a pier and gazing into the water. But I know absolutely nothing about his death, sir, I assure you. Now, about my being here. I'd like to explain—"

"That is not necessary," interrupted Astro, "I know everything I wish to, now."

"What do you mean? What do you know about my private affairs?"

"I'll tell you, Mr. Hudson. First, for a long time you have been anxious to discover some way of making more money than you could in the real estate business. You and your wife wanted to go abroad; and you are very fond of her and naturally wished to please her. Thinking it over and watching the advertisements, you saw that the quickest way to make money was to go into some sort of fortune-telling business and play on the credulity of fools. Knowing of the compound pendulum and the curves it traces so mysteriously, you decided to adopt that as the basis of your graft. You found a willing helper in Professor Dove, who was—well, just a little cracked, and inclined to believe thoroughly in his own psychic powers. You backed him in this enterprise," Astro waved his hand round the room; "but, being a church-member, you naturally couldn't afford to let any one, your wife especially, know of your being engaged in a business that was so undignified and of such dubious morality.

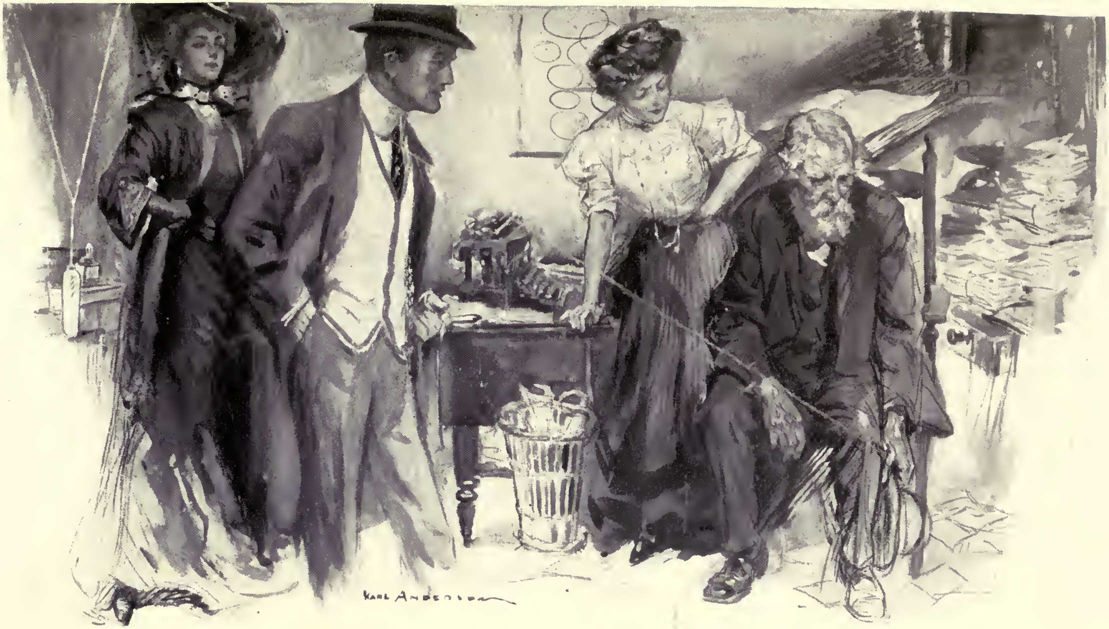
"You advertised, and did so well that you needed more help. You couldn't afford to be known in the matter, and so, when Miss Vivian, here, came to your office to get work, you selected her as assistant. Not wishing to be seen too much in her company, you went to call on her, and finally induced her to help the professor. Then the professor went on one of his periodical debauches, she telephoned to you, and you came down here to straighten out the correspondence, which was becoming larger and more profitable every day. There was more work to it than you at first thought. You had to stay here that night; then you became afraid of Dove's disappearance and of the post-office inspectors. So you buckled down to a night and day job of it until you could clean up the money before you were caught. You are now about ready to quit the affair altogether. Is this correct?"

The old man, who had been listening in great astonishment, assented. "But are you going to report all this to my wife, sir?" he faltered. "It will simply kill her. Can't you keep this from her? I promise to give up the business right now."

Astro drew a telegraph blank from his pocket. There was a message already written on the yellow slip, and he handed it over to Hudson. It read:

"ROCHESTER, Oct. 21, 4 P. M.

"Why no letter? Did you receive mine? Returning Empire State Limited to-night. JOHN."



“I know absolutely nothing about his death sir, I assure you.”

"Ring for a messenger boy and send this," continued the Master of Mysteries. "She will not know that it isn't a genuine telegram. A woman in her state of mind won't notice anything, I'm sure; and I think if you turn up at the Grand Central, appearing to have come in on that train, she will be there to meet you with open arms."

Tears appeared in the old man's eyes. "I'll do it!" he said. "And to-morrow I'll buy a couple of tickets for Naples. God bless you, sir, for your kindness!"

"And what's to become of me?" spoke up Miss Vivian.

Astro looked at her indulgently. "You may go on with this work here, for all I care," he said. "It's a very tidy little business apparently, and none of my affair. But I advise you rather to apply for a position in Mr. Hudson's office. I don't think, however, that with your face and figure you will have much trouble in getting employment."

"Oh, I'll see to that," said John Hudson.

"Well," Valeska said with relief, as she and Astro left the office, "it's all over now."

"Not at all!" remarked her companion bruskly. "I haven't earned my fee yet. Come into this drug store with me a moment."

He went to the telephone and called up Mrs. John Hudson. "Mrs. Hudson," he said, "I've been consulting my crystals, and have just seen your husband in Rochester. He was taking a train for New York. He had just consummated a real estate deal there which had been very profitable, and I think you will see him safe and sound again to-night. Kindly send my check to the studio. Thank you. Good night."

"My crystals are certainly wonderful," said Astro, laughing.

"Yes," said Valeska, "and I think you're rather wonderful yourself."

THE STOLEN SHAKESPEARE

HESITATING at the door of the studio long enough only to send to Astro a quick surreptitious message with her eyes—indicating, apparently, contempt for the visitor—Valeska announced, "Mr. Barrister," and left the two men alone in the room.

The newcomer looked about a bit foolishly, and then turned to the palmist. "You're Astro, I suppose?"

Astro, in robe and turban, bowed gravely and his glance slumbered.

"Eh—ah—the fact is, sir," continued Barrister, "that I have come here about a peculiar matter, and solely, sir, to please my wife. She has a woman's weakness for anything occult,—anything full of folderol and fake. You see, I don't take any stock in it myself; but—"

"I understand perfectly," said the Master of Mysteries without apparent annoyance. He seemed, in fact, to be bored already.

The other teetered affably on his toes and heels, condescension in his manner. "She had heard that you professed to be some kind of fortune-teller, besides doing this palmistry business. Is that so?"

"I have had occasion at times to use certain powers which are—ah—supposed to be occult. I say 'supposed to be', out of deference to your manifest feelings in the matter, Mr. Barrister."

"Hum!" said the prospective client quickly. "Well, whether they are or not doesn't matter in this case, as I'm here simply to please my wife. If I didn't come, she'd come, you know. However, if you are able to locate what we want, I'll be willing to acknowledge anything you wish, and pay you accordingly. I suppose you are a medium, then?"

"Some call it that," acknowledged the reserved young man. "I myself assert that I have merely done a few things that others find it too hard to do."

"Such as—"

"Kindly let me look at your hand."

"Bosh!" said Barrister; but he gazed at his own palm, nevertheless, with a new air of curiosity, and after a moment stretched it toward the palmist. "Well, see what you can find in it!" he said.

Astro looked at it negligently; then, under his half-shut lids his eyes sped rapidly over his client's person, the neat business suit beneath the black dress overcoat, the daintily tied scarf, the highly polished shoes, and the general air of careful grooming. Then they returned to the hand before him. Finally, the Seer leaned back listlessly and smiled.

"You went to see Anna Held last night, and were bored. You once had your pockets picked, and will probably have it happen to you again. You are interested in Egyptology—and, apropos, I wish you'd look at my porphyry sphinx there and give me some idea of its age."

Barrister stared, and grew a bit uneasy. Then, apparently to hide his embarrassment, he turned to the carved image and surveyed it with the air of a connoisseur. As he presented his back to the Seer, the latter swiftly stooped over, picked up a return check of a New York theater, good the night before, and slid it into one of the pockets of his silk robe.

"That's about 1400 B. C.," said Barrister easily. "Where on earth did you get hold of it?"

"From my godfather, in Cairo," said the palmist.

"Well," said Barrister, returning, "I've no time now to examine it closely."

"And the matter which worries your wife?" Astro inquired.

Again his visitor hesitated, looked about the room, and gazed again at the sphinx. "Well," he said finally, "I'll tell you." He seated himself and went on: "I have, or rather did have, a First Folio Shakespeare, one of the few good ones of the thirty-seven copies extant. It was stolen from my library yesterday. That's what I want to find—"

"That, and the one who stole it also, I suppose?"

"Er—yes. Yes, certainly."

"An interesting sort of quarry, and rather unusual. Have you been to the police?"

Barrister pursed his lips and shook his head.

"No. You see, there wouldn't be much use in that, would there? I'm afraid the thief, if he found he was suspected, would destroy the book. He can't sell it, anyway; for these folios are as well known to collectors as good race-horses are to touts. He can't get away with it; for every bookman in the world will soon know it if he offers it for sale. I want it back, of course; but it is my wife's idea, this coming to you about it. She gave me the book when we were first married, and so, naturally, I value it at even more than its own great intrinsic value."

"Have you ever had any offers for it?" Astro asked carelessly.

"What? Offers? Oh, no; no indeed; no offers at all. Why should I want to sell it? No, sir! It would be useless for any one to attempt to buy it."

"But nobody is harming you by offering. When did you miss it?"

"Last night, after I came home from the theater. I went to see Anna Held, as you said, though how the mischief you knew it I can't see, and we came home early, disgusted. We happened to be talking about the Folio, and my wife walked to the case and looked for it. It was gone."

"Had the lock been tampered with?"

"Yes, forced. The window had been pried open with a jimmy, too. It was evidently done by a burglar who knew just what he wanted. But it doesn't look like a professional's work; for the book would be too hard to dispose of."

"I see," said Astro. He gazed away into space and puffed at his water-pipe meditatively. "Mr. Barrister, I'll try to find it for you. If I succeed in getting the book or the person who stole it from you, my charge will be five hundred dollars."

"All right," said Barrister, rising. "Will you want to come up to my house and look over the place?"

"I think I can put myself more en rapport with the case, if I do; I want to feel the vibrations, so to speak, and no doubt I shall get an impression of the aura of the culprit if I am on the spot. The rest I shall do with the crystals."

Barrister did not conceal his scorn. "Oh, very well," he said, "I suppose it will at least satisfy my wife. When will you be up?"

"To-morrow morning, early. I'll ask you to disturb nothing, and even to keep away from the room until I come."

"There's nothing to disturb," Barrister commented; "but I'll see to it that nobody interferes with your magic." And so saying, he took up his hat, gave the sphinx one last glance, and left the room.

When he was gone the palmist doffed his regalia and yawned. A moment later Valeska reentered the studio. Astro gazed at her reflectively.

"Did you notice that man's watch-charm?" he asked.

"Why, there was something funny about it; but I couldn't make the thing out exactly."

"Did you ever see an Egyptian scarab?"

"Why, yes. But he didn't have one, did he?"

"He used to have one. You know how they mount them,—with a pin through the beetle so it can revolve? The setting and the pin were there; but not the stone. You must look closer next time."

"What else did I miss?" she asked, pouting.

"You didn't say anything about his carrying his purse in his outside overcoat pocket. He will always be an easy mark for the light-fingered gentry if he keeps that up. It's lucky for him that he's rich."

"Oh, he is wealthy, of course! I got that much right, anyway. He looked as if he were very well-off, in fact."

"I should imagine he was, with a First Folio Shakespeare lying loose in his library! That's what we've got to find."

"It's interesting?"

"Interesting! I should say so! It's a regular kidnaping case. Talk about diamonds! Why, they're stupid things. Every one likes diamonds, and they can be cut up into smaller stones and readily disposed of, if you're careful about it. But you can't cut a page out of a First Folio, you can't even hint that you'd like to sell it, without all the world knowing about it. Book-hunters are the most determined and interesting collectors in the world. I know of no passion to equal it."

He walked over to the telephone and called up a leading dealer in rare volumes.

"I wish to ask about a First Folio Shakespeare. Are there any bidders in the open market for a copy?" He wrote down rapidly on a tab as he spoke into the receiver,—"William A. Hepson. Oh, yes, the millionaire. Ah, thank you."

He slammed the instrument down vigorously, snatched up a telegraph blank, rapidly wrote a message, and handed it to Valeska.

She read it aloud:

> "WILLIAM A. HEPSON, Chicago, Ill.—Will you give four thousand dollars for a guaranteed First Folio Shakespeare? Wire reply to Jane Gore, 181 East 18th Street, New York."

"Why!" she exclaimed. "Have you located it already?"

"Not quite. But I have an idea, and this will help, if we get an answer by to-morrow morning."

"Who is he?"

"He's a Chicago beef packer who offered four thousand dollars for the book a while ago; but, curiously enough, he was in town this week."

"Is he in the city now?"

"That's what I should like very much to know myself. In the meantime, send this, get the answer at your place, and bring it to me in the morning. Then we'll go up and see Mrs. Barrister."

Valeska appeared next morning with a yellow envelope. "He refuses your offer," she said.

"Good!" exclaimed the Master of Mysteries, rubbing his hands in satisfaction. "He has the Folio, then, as I suspected. Now, to work! This case already begins to offer delicate little labyrinths which are nothing short of delicious to the analytical mind. We'll lose no time getting out to Mrs. Barrister's, and I want you to use your eyes better than you did last night. I expect you to see everything that I don't. Remember to watch me, though, and be ready for instructions. Notice any signal that I may happen to give you. For instance, if I raise my eyes to the ceiling, my next look will be at what I want you to notice. If I touch anything, you're to take it and look at it carefully, and follow what I say next. If I cough, you're to create some diversion so that I shan't be noticed for a few moments."

Valeska laughed. "You'll be doing a trance next. Funny how well the bluff always works, isn't it?"

Astro frowned. "My dear," he said pompously, "there are waves of the ether,—N-rays, X-rays, actinic and ultraviolet vibrations, to which I am exceedingly susceptible. I have an inner sense and an esoteric knowledge of life and its mysteries that is hidden from all who have not lived for cycles and eons in solitude and contemplation with the Mahatmas of the Himalayas!"

Valeska, instead of being impressed, broke into a rippling laugh as they went up the avenue.

The Barristers lived in a large, solemn brownstone house off Fifth Avenue, one of a hundred similar domiciles, heavily furnished, dim, close, lusterless, quiet, warm. Astro and his assistant waited in the reception-room till Mrs. Barrister appeared. She was large, plumply built, with gray hair artfully pompadoured and undulated, and a pleasant, though not very intelligent smile; a woman that still kept herself well and carried herself well, treasuring the last remains of what had been a comfortable prettiness. She greeted them cordially.

"I'm *so* glad you've come!" she announced. "Seems as if I couldn't wait any longer; for I felt sure that you could help us if anybody could, and I do feel so terribly about this robbery! You know it was my wedding gift to Mr. Barrister. My husband agreed with me that it wasn't exactly a case for the police, and we don't want any more talk about it than is absolutely necessary. I've heard so much about you, Mr. Astro; for a great many of my friends have gone to you, and you told them such remarkable things! Then that case of your finding the Sacarnet sapphire gave me considerable confidence in you. Why, my own mother once recovered a purse she had lost, by going to a medium about it!" She bustled about amiably.

"Now, I suppose you want to see the library, don't you? You know Mr. Barrister doesn't believe in anything supernatural, and he wouldn't stay. But I'll show you in."

During this long speech, Valeska's eyes traveled over Mrs. Barrister's portly person; but the Master of Mysteries seemed rapt in thought, abstracted and inattentive. He rose now, however, and followed through the folding doors into the library beyond. The shades had been drawn as if a death had occurred; she raised them, showing a square room, every wall lined with glass-covered bookcases. She went up to one, beside a window, and threw open a door. It was as if she were displaying a rifled tomb.

"Here is where it was kept,—right in there. You can see the marks of a chisel or something near the lock. The frame was pried open. Isn't it dreadful? That book was like an only child to us!"

Astro apparently gave it scarcely a glance. "Mrs. Barrister," he said, "I'll ask you kindly to leave me here alone for fifteen minutes. I am extraordinarily sensitive to vibrations; but I must be undisturbed while I concentrate my mind sufficiently to induce the proper psychic conditions. Meanwhile my assistant will stay with you."

Mrs. Barrister was impressed, and withdrew without further questioning. The door of the library was shut, and the two women sat down by a window in the reception-room. Valeska immediately began her own line of investigation.

"When did you last see the book?" she asked.

"Thursday afternoon at about four o'clock I showed it to a caller, and then locked the case as usual. We got home from the theater that night a little after ten, and went almost immediately to the library, as we had been having a discussion about one of the lines in *Macbeth*. Then we saw that the book was gone."

"Do you know of any one having entered the room, besides yourself and Mr. Barrister, between four and ten?"

"Mary, my maid, was in with the tea things; that's all I know."

"And you don't suspect her?"

"Oh, no! She has been with me for years."

"And the caller?"

Mrs. Barrister thought for a moment before answering. Then she said, "It was a Mr. White. I confess I don't like him very well. But he's more a friend of my husband's than mine. In fact, my husband came in before Mr. White left; so I went up-stairs and left the two men alone. I had an idea there was some trouble between them."

"Does your husband belong to any club?"

"Yes, the Booklovers, and the Stage Club. So does Mr. White. Why?"

"Oh," said Valeska carelessly, "Mr. Barrister seemed such a man of the world,—just the man to belong to clubs, you know. But who showed Mr. White out the door?"

"Why, Mr. Barrister went with him himself. You see, it couldn't have been possible for Mr. White to have concealed the book; it's quite large, you know?"

"You have looked everywhere, of course?"

"Oh, yes. We went immediately to work, searched Mary's room at her request, and then everywhere else in the house. It simply isn't here."

At this moment Astro opened the door and walked silently into the room.

"Oh," Mrs. Barrister suddenly exclaimed, "I quite forgot to tell Mr. Astro something that I'm sure is important! It's a clue we discovered while we were searching the library after we had found the scratches and the broken lock of the case. Here it is!" She drew a scrap of paper from her purse and handed it to him. It was evidently the corner of a letter, and bore a few words written in violet ink.

The palmist held it lightly in his hand for a moment, then asked, "Has any one else had this, except you?"

"Oh, yes. Mr. Barrister himself found it, and, of course, he examined it carefully; but he could make nothing of it."

Astro cast his eyes to the ceiling, and then down on the paper again. He pressed it to his forehead, then handed it to his assistant.

"I shall have to wait until the last influences are evaporated, leaving the original personality of the writer to assert itself." He whirled quickly about, placed his hand to his lips, and coughed.

"Oh, Mrs. Barrister!" Valeska exclaimed. "Look at this paper again for a moment. Come to the light by the window here. It seemed to me I saw a watermark that showed through when I held it to the light. See if you can see it." As she spoke she drew the woman into the bay-window so that she stood with her back to the room.

Astro stepped quickly over to a bookcase against the wall, and, keeping his eyes carefully on Mrs. Barrister, reached to the top of one of the shelves. Four or five books protruded about an inch from the rest of the line. Astro's hand curved over these and down behind until it touched the shelf. Before Mrs. Barrister had turned again, his hand was withdrawn. He spoke sharply.

"Could you lend me a screw-driver?"

"Certainly." She rang for the maid, who appeared, and was sent on the errand. In a few minutes she returned.

"I'm very sorry, Mrs. Barrister, but I can't find it. We always keep it in the kitchen closet; but it's not there now."

"I thought so," said Astro. "But one question, Mary, before you go. First, let me see your palm."

The girl held out her hand timidly, with wonder in her face.

The Master of Mysteries felt of it tentatively, then looked directly into her eyes. "Mary," he said, "where were you after dinner-time on Thursday; from then until Mr. and Mrs. Barrister returned home?"

"In the kitchen with the cook most of the time, sir. I went up into the dining-room beside the library once or twice, though."

"You heard nothing unusual?"

"Nothing at all, sir."

"How did you get that violet stain on your finger?"

Mary looked at it calmly. "It was from writing a letter the other day. I couldn't get it all off."

"I think I have stayed as long as is necessary," said Astro, turning to Mrs. Barrister, "and now, if you'll excuse me, I'll go. I shall report to your husband as soon as I find anything."

Leaving with his assistant, he walked slowly down the front steps. As soon as they were out of sight of the windows, he said, "Well, what did you find out while I was investigating, Valeska?"

She narrated the conversation while Astro walked thoughtfully beside her, his eyes roaming from side to side, until they lighted upon a line of ash barrels near the curb. He stopped.

"See here, Valeska!" he exclaimed suddenly. "I wish you'd go into this house and find out in some way how long these barrels have been standing here. It's a shame the way the Board of Health neglects its duties. Do you see? Tell them you have been sent by a Civic Reform committee to find out if there's any complaint."

He walked on, smiling to himself. "Entirely too clever," he murmured; "so clever that it's positively stupid!" He approached the ash cans and surveyed their contents. From the top of one he gingerly drew out a torn sheet of paper. Another barrel showed, among its overflowing contents, several tin cans, a shoe, a lot of broken bottles, and a mass of sawdust. He gave them a hard look, then sauntered on till Valeska caught up with him.

"Those barrels have been out since Thursday," she said.

He smiled and made no comment. "Now," he said, "what I want you to do is to call on this Mr. White. You had better be getting subscriptions for a book. Get one for a sample at some shop,—something rather silly too—*Bibliophiles and Their Hobbies*—and you are to find out White's private opinion of Barrister. Barrister, you understand, has already subscribed. You may work it up any way you like, only be sure to get some expression of opinion."

It was almost noon before Valeska returned from her errand, and, as by this time the palmist's outer office was filled with waiting clients, it was the lunch hour before she could speak to him.

"I shall have to raise my fee again," he said. "Ten dollars a reading doesn't seem to stop them at all. I'll make them come only by appointment after this. But what did you find out?"

The girl's eyes sparkled with news. "Hepson's our man,—Hepson via White, I guess. Hepson saw Barrister, too, at the club the other morning. Hepson's gone; but White—"

"Hepson, Hepson, Hepson!" mimicked the Seer, with a smile at her eagerness. "But pray give us more news about White."

Valeska laughed. "Well, he's awfully sore on Barrister for some reason. He believes Mr. Barrister's a fool, I gather."

"He isn't in love with Mrs. Barrister, is he?"

"No! He's in love with himself, I think. He said, for one thing, that Barrister knew no more about books than he did about poker."

"Poker! How's that?"

"Why, I told him I had sold several copies to members of the Stage Club,—I got their names out of the *Blue Book,* and knew they played pretty hard there,—so we got to chatting about our luck. You see, I told him I liked to play myself, and he began telling me how successful he always was. Then he said he had hard work with some of his friends to collect the gambling debts they owed him."

"I see." The Master of Mysteries turned into his den, and Valeska followed him.

"Why, what's this?" she asked, pointing to a large, flat, heavy parcel on the table. "Why, it's addressed to Mr. Hepson in Chicago! Oh! have you found the Folio already?"

Astro smiled. "I told you some time ago that Hepson already had it. But this is getting warm."

Valeska fingered the package. "It looks just like a big atlas wrapped up."

"It is," said Astro. "I bought it at a book-shop after I left you."

"What in the world do you want to send it to Hepson for, then?"

"I don't particularly. But I should like to show it to the clerk at a certain branch office of the Adams Express Company here."

"Oh, I do wish you'd explain!" Valeska exclaimed.

"I'd rather let you do a little thinking for yourself. You have seen White. You know that Hepson was in town. You have heard Barrister's story. Nothing could be simpler. For instance, how about Mary the maid, and the violet ink stains? What would you make of that?" He stopped a moment, smiling. "I will tell you, however, that I found the screw-driver that was used to open the bookcase with and to force the window with; for it wasn't a jimmy at all."

"Where was it?"

"You recall when I gave you the signal to distract Mrs. Barrister's attention? You did it very cleverly. At that moment I was more interested in the appearance of several books in a case in the library than I was in the scrap of paper. The instrument, badly bent and twisted, was behind those projecting books."

"Oh!" Valeska studied at it. "No wonder Mary couldn't find it! Then it must have been Mary, after all. But why didn't she throw the screw-driver away? Perhaps she thought it would be missed, and wanted a chance to have it straightened out."

"Perhaps so," said Astro dryly.

"But what about the scrap of paper, then?" asked the girl. "Have you made anything of that?"

"A good deal," replied the Master. "For instance, here's the rest of the sheet," and he took from his pocket the portion that he had removed from the ash barrel. "Does that give you a clue?"

She studied a moment. "Now, wait! Don't tell me, please! Your rule is, 'Ask yourself what there is about this crime that distinguishes it from others. How is it different from the ordinary run of things? Then seize upon that difference, be it great or small, and proceed logically and analytically in any direction it offers.' But what *is* different? It's *all* different, it seems to me."

"Well, you work it out, and I'll go down and try to find an express office in which a flat parcel addressed to a Chicago millionaire will have been noticed. You may turn away any people who come for a reading. This is going to bring in more money than I thought, and it will pay to follow it up while it's hot."

Valeska met him at the front door when he returned, and said in a low voice, "Mr. Barrister is here."

"Certainly," said Astro. "I telephoned him to be here at four o'clock."

"Then you are finished?"

"You'll see."

"I found out that White had left town to-day," she announced.

"Aha!" said the Seer cryptically.

He went in and bowed gravely to Barrister in the reception-room. Valeska busied herself at her desk and watched under her brows. Astro took his accustomed seat on the divan.

"Mr. Barrister," he said, after a pause, "I am sorry to say that I have been unable to find either the Folio or the thief."

The other immediately rose, shaking his head emphatically and triumphantly. "I thought as much," he said. "This is what all this charlatanry usually amounts to. You're all alike,—you can impose upon credulous women; but when it comes actually to accomplishing anything, you can't deliver the goods. However, I've satisfied my wife, at any rate. I suppose there will be no charge in these circumstances, Mr. Astro?"

The Master of Mysteries twirled his thumbs and spoke dreamily. "On the contrary, Mr. Barrister, my services on this case will cost you just one thousand dollars."

His client stared at him indignantly. His brow drew down. "What in the world do you mean, sir? One thousand dollars!"

"One thousand dollars is my fee. I can give you a blank check if you haven't your book with you."

"But you've discovered nothing."

"I said that I had not found the book or the thief."

"And yet your fee, if you had found either, was to have been only five hundred! I don't understand what you are driving at, sir!"

Astro recrossed his legs and gave his client gaze for gaze. He spoke now very deliberately. His languorous tone had given place to a crisp hard enunciation. "Mr. Barrister," he said, "what you say is true. You understand me perfectly. If I had told you the name of the thief and the location of the book, I should have charged you only five hundred dollars. My price for *not* telling is one thousand. Do you understand me now?"

He took up a crystal sphere and began to regard it fixedly.

Barrister's face had changed from perplexity to anger, and then to a sudden comprehension. He dropped his head and gazed at the carpet, standing for some moments irresolute and dismayed. Finally he walked to the desk, took the blank check that Valeska handed to him, and dipped his pen into the ink. He looked up.

"You never expect to find the culprit, I suppose?" he asked, with a strange expression on his face.

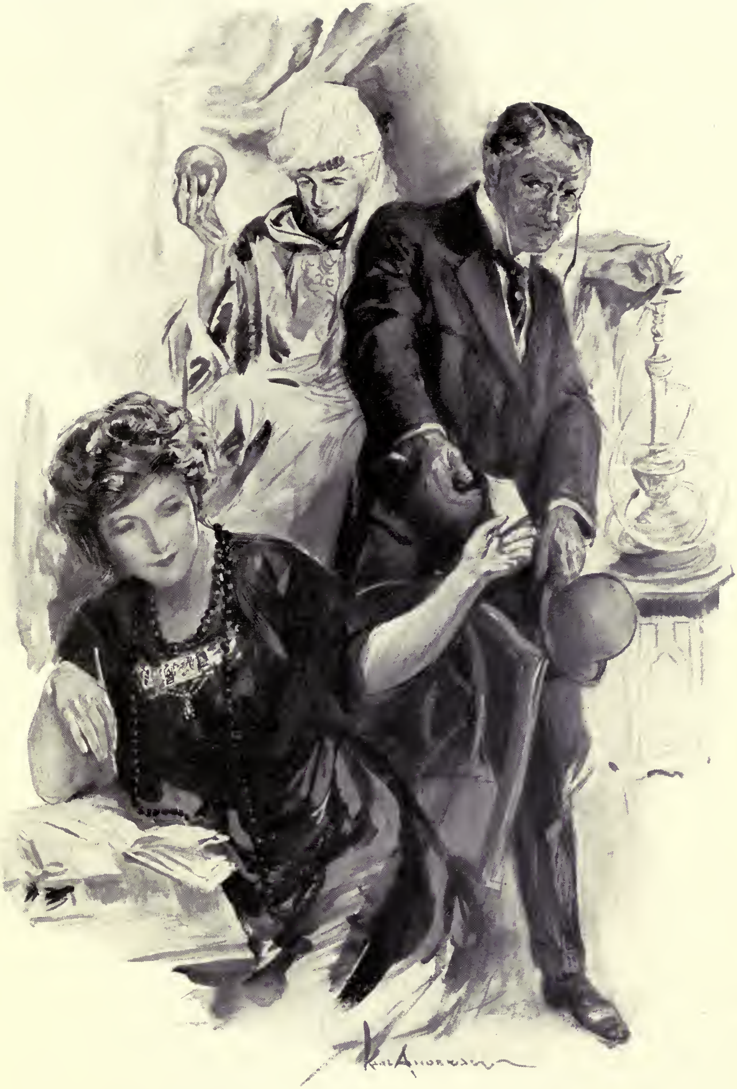
"I never expect to," answered the Seer.

Barrister signed his name and handed over the check. "You are a most extraordinary young man, sir!" he snarled, and left the room, slamming the door behind him.

Valeska stared, her brows knitted. "Wait a minute! I've almost got it! It was Barrister himself who stole the book—his own book—"

"Which his wife had given him when they were married; don't forget that," said Astro.

"Yes; so, of course, he wouldn't want her to know he had been mean enough to dispose of it. She is still in love with him, I could see that, and she's a sentimental



Barrister signed his name and handed over the check.

old thing, too. So he had to mimic a burglary, did he?"

"And very stupidly he did it,—with an ordinary screw-driver which he didn't have sense enough to destroy."

"But why did he want the book? What did he do with it?"

"Made arrangements with Hepson that morning; stole it that afternoon. Gambling debt. You found that out yourself from White, who had been forcing Barrister for the money, and was sore because he wouldn't pay up. Barrister is sadly in need of ready cash; I found that out from his bank. And Hepson offered him three thousand for his Folio."

"Then Hepson has the book now?"

"Or it's on its way there. That's the reason he turned our telegraph offer down. He wasn't interested, because Barrister had already sold him his copy."

"How did you know that?"

"Let me ask you one question. What was there about this case that was different from most affairs like it?"

Valeska pondered. "Why, it seems to me strange that Barrister didn't call in the police at once."

"Precisely. If he had, he was afraid he would have trouble, and Hepson might be investigated. It's easy enough now for Barrister to keep his wife from knowing anything of the sale; and Hepson will be glad enough at getting the book to say nothing about it for a year or two. There was my start. It seemed queer that Barrister, losing so valuable a treasure, shouldn't report it at once and have it traced, and all the dealers notified. His wife's belief in the occult was what got him safely over the necessity of calling in the police. I didn't like the way he protested so much that nobody had offered to buy his Folio. It seemed to back up my suspicion."

"I rather suspected Mary," commented Valeska, "when I saw the violet stains on her fingers just like the ink on the scrap of paper. By the way, where did you get the rest of that paper, and what does it mean? It quite led me astray."

"Which was precisely what it was intended to do. Our friend Mr. Barrister tried not only to hide his own tracks, but to create false ones in order to befuddle any detective who tackled the job. I noticed the violet writing as we came past the ash barrels. So, I presume, did Barrister when he came home after committing the robbery. 'Aha!' he said to himself, 'here's a chance to fool any detective that comes hunting for clues. I'll give him clues!' So he took the piece, tore off a part, and carefully left it on the floor. I confess that was clever; for as his finding of it in the ash can was entirely accidental, no one knows where such a trail might have led to. But the trouble is that such a man always goes too far, especially when he has to work in a hurry. Now, there's the case of the boots, for instance."

"But I didn't see any boots."

"I saw one in the ash barrel,—a left shoe. When I looked out the window that was supposed to have been forced, I saw the prints of a right boot; but it had nails in the heel arranged just as its brother in the barrel had. Of course Barrister took the shoe out of the barrel and used it to make the footprints of a supposititious burglar."

"Why," exclaimed the girl, "it's just as wonderful as if you had really done it with crystal gazing! But I don't see how you could be sure, after all. There was White, who might have been Hepson's tool."

"Yes, I had two lines I might have worked on,—White as well as Barrister,—but White had been winning plenty of money, and is well-off, anyway. He wouldn't go around jimmying windows to get things, either."

"Still, I insist you had nothing that absolutely connected Barrister with his own misdeeds."

"Hadn't I? If you had gone into about ten branch express offices in the down-town district as I had, you'd have found out. You recall my package? It was just the same size as the Folio. I finally found the office that I was looking for, and said to the clerk, 'I sent a package to Mr. Hepson two days ago, and he telegraphs that it hasn't been received. So I'm sending this. I wish you'd look it up and see what's the matter. It's from Renold M. White.' Well, the clerk looked over his record of carbon duplicate receipts, and said, 'There was a package sent from a Mr. Barrister to a Mr. Hepson in Chicago; but none from White.' So I said, 'Never mind,' and left."

The two sat in silence for some time. At last the Master of Mysteries spoke:

"There is just one thing I don't like about this case of the theft of the First Folio Shakespeare."

"What's that?" asked Valeska.

"This is the first time I go on record as not having run down my quarry; but it has paid fairly well—for two days' work." And he smiled as he took up an antique volume of the *Kabala.*

THE MACDOUGAL STREET AFFAIR

ENTERING the room slowly, grave and distinguished in his flowing silken robes, Astro did not glance at his visitor till he had seated himself in a picturesque pose upon the divan. Then, taking up the silver mouthpiece of his water-pipe, he gave a long sober look at the stranger.

"It's a pity you are unhappily married," he said, gazing languidly at the red and gold ceiling above him. He semed to pay little attention to the thick hairy hand of his client, which lay limp on the velvet cushion.

Opposite him the bull-necked, red-faced man sat staring in amazement, no longer wearing the contemptuous, amused expression with which he had entered the astrological parlors of the slim, romantic-looking, young man in the turban. Like many another unbeliever who had come to test Astro in that very room, his look had changed gradually from scorn to interest, until now his eyes were fixed on the palmist with eager curiosity and perplexity.

"No doubt it's her fault," Astro continued; "for she is indifferent and selfish. It might be better if you were to let it come to an actual quarrel, and be separated." He reached for his narghile, and took a long bubbling whiff of perfumed smoke, as if, as far as he was concerned. the matter had been weighed and settled.

There came at this moment the sound of a muffled electric bell. His client still gazed stupidly in front of him, but said nothing. He did not seem to notice the signal.

Astro, however, rose and went to a pair of black velvet curtains hanging at one side of the wall behind his visitor's back. There was a mirror hung above which reflected the stocky form of the man at the little table, the bulge of a revolver in his hip pocket, and the round head with its short cropped hair. The head did not turn. Astro parted the hangings deftly and peered within. On a level with his eyes was a small square window, lighted from behind. Against the glass a sheet of paper was fastened, and on it was written in a feminine scrawl, "Plain-clothes man. Working on the Macdougal Street dynamite case."

Valeska smiled at him from the secret cabinet.

Astro picked up a magnifying-glass, dropped the curtains, and returned to his client. Seating himself, he looked carefully at the lines in the detective's palm; after which he took a small crystal sphere from a drawer in the table, set it on the cushion, and seemed to lose himself in prolonged contemplation of the mysteries hidden within it. His vis-à-vis fidgeted restlessly.

"You are a busy man indeed," commented Astro, half aloud. "Not only are you keeping your eye on the crooks around the Rennick Hotel, and investigating several pool-room layouts, but you come up here in reality to see if my place is, as you would call it, 'on the square'. How on earth you have time for all this, when you are so puzzled about the Macdougal Street business, is more than I can see. You must be a man of extraordinary resource."

The officer stared like a child at the dreamy-eyed Oriental before him. "Gosh!" he said almost plaintively. Then he rose and thrust his big hairy hands into his pockets. "Say, what do you know about that dynamite affair, anyway?" he asked.

Astro smiled. "Nothing. I'm too busy to trouble about things that are not any of my business."

"But what if it was your business?" continued the policeman eagerly. "What if I made it an object to you?"

Astro assumed a dramatic air of omnipotence.

"Ah!" answered the Seer. "No doubt I could tell you anything you wished to know."

The man drew out a pocketbook. "See here," he said, tapping it, "I ain't rich by any means; but I'm up against it on this case, and if you can look into them glasses and give me a tip, I'll make it worth your while."

Astro laughed. "Oh, it's not quite so simple as that. You must understand, my dear sir, that I can do absolutely nothing without coming into direct personal contact with the vibrations emanating from the scene or from the individual. I can tell about you, because you happen to be before me; but I should have to be present at the place in order to become sensitive to the occult influences that have permeated the vicinity of the crime. Do you understand?"

The officer evidently did not understand; but he was in nowise deterred from making use of this power that had so impressed him. "I'll take you up there," he offered.

"Very well," said Astro. "I'll help you on this case, Mr. —"

"McGraw."

"—Mr.Graw, with the distinct understanding, however, that I am to be left to do what I like, undisturbed and unwatched. Utter abstraction, my dear sir, the harmony of the Tatvic Rythm, is in all instances absolutely necessary. I see the invisible; I hear the inaudible; I touch the intangible."

The detective stood like a cow gazing on an eighth wonder of the world. "All right," he said lamely. "When'll you come?"

"At three this afternoon. Meet me in front of the place—number 950, isn't it? That's right. But first I should like to know what you have learned about the matter."

"Well, it's just this way. There's a chap at number 950 named Pietro Gallino. He has a wholesale wine and grocery shop, and does a considerable importing business; he also acts as a sort of local banker. Two weeks ago he got a letter that was made up of words torn out of a newspaper, telling him to leave a thousand dollars in ten-dollar bills underneath a certain bench by the arch into Washington Square. He was to put it there the next night, or else his place would be blown up. He went dippy about it, of course, and reported it to the police right away. We told him to put up a dummy package and carry out instructions. He did that and the place was watched. Nobody came, of course. The next day there was an explosion in front of his store, and it smashed up the windows and doors good and plenty. Then he got another letter, something like the first one, only he was to put the money in a certain fire bucket on the third floor of a building at 231 Vestry Street. Somebody came that time! but, with three exits to the building and us watching every one of them, we couldn't nab our man. The next day there was an explosion on top of Gallino's building, and then came this last letter."

He took from his pocketbook a sheet of paper, folded. On it were pasted irregular fragments from the advertising pages of a newspaper. It read as follows:

> "Have a thousand dollars with you, day and night. We will tell you how to pay before the twelfth. If any more tricks, will blow you to pieces sure!"

It was signed with the dread insignia of the Black Hand,—a skull and cross-bones and a rudely drawn hand.

Astro looked at it carelessly, pressed it to his forehead, fingered it sensitively, and then put it in his pocket with composure. "Very well. I get from this letter, even now, a subtle impression, and when I encounter these vibrations in the flesh I shall immediately recognize them. The criminal has a violet soul, tending toward purple. Purples are malicious and very dangerous. This aura distresses me." And he foppishly sniffed at a bottle of smelling-salts.

The effect of this was not lost on McGraw. "I don't know how the mischief you get wise," said the dazed officer; "but it don't matter how you turn the trick, just so you deliver the goods. I'll see you at three then. And be mighty careful of that paper!"

Astro nodded impassively as his visitor left. Then he pressed an electric button, and Valeska Wynne, his young assistant, entered the room with a free and easy, graceful, girlish stride. She smiled quickly, and lifted her eyebrows at the departing plain-clothes man.

"Easy enough to tip you that time," she remarked, "I passed him on the stairs with a policeman, and caught a few words. Anything in him?"

"No money; but it's a good advertisement, and it gets me in with the police, so that I shall be able to rely on them for help from time to time. Did you notice the chalk on his sleeve?"

"Sure; but I didn't have time to tell you, and I knew you'd get that. Billiard cue, I suppose?"

"Hardly—not in this Broadway neighborhood; though it's possible. Billiard-cue chalk hereabout is generally green in color. That white stuff probably means a bucket-shop. He's been nosing round illegal race-track, gambling places, I imagine. At least I told him so, and it took. Notice the dab of gilt paint on his vest?"

"No," answered the girl.

"They're rebronzing the furnishings and decorations in the Rennick lobby to-day. Inasmuch as that is the notorious hotel for crooks of all descriptions, I saw at a glance that he had been there. Did you observe his handkerchief?"

"Oh, yes," said she eagerly, glad at last to have caught one point in the train of the master's deduction. "It was a small one—a woman's, of course."

"And the top button of his coat?"

"No." Valeska's face fell.

"Sewed on with fine copper wire instead of thread. What do you make of that?" He surveyed her quizzically.

She puckered her pretty face for a moment, then raised her fair blue eyes interrogatively. "They seem contradictory, don't they? The handkerchief would suggest marriage; unless it's a souvenir—"

"No. He used it too strenuously, I'm afraid, for any sentiment to be attached to it; his only emotion seemed to be disgust at its size—or lack of size. His wife's, of course. She's alive, and with him, or her handkerchiefs wouldn't be where he'd pick one up in a hurry; probably mixed in with his when the laundry came home."

"It might be his sister's," suggested the girl.

"Why didn't she sew his buttons on for him, then? Oh, it's simple enough. But your tip was what really helped me most with McGraw—that's his name—after all. He wants me to help him solve the Macdougal Street mystery."

In a few minutes Astro went over the history of the affair, and laid the last threatening letter on the table. Valeska inspected it carefully.

"The pieces are all cut from the advertising pages of *The Era,*" she said finally.

"Good! Except these two, which, you see, instead of being cut, are torn along the edge. Not much of a clue, but worth remembering."

"What do you know about the Black Hand?" Valeska asked.

"As much as any one, and that is—nothing. Even Petrosini, the greatest of metropolitan Italian sleuths, said that there was no such thing. Warburton, on *Immigration,* has some very interesting chapters concerning the bloodthirsty Sicilian and his criminal organization, all of which have been corroborated in the recent

Camorra and Mafia trials. But here in America there is really no Black Hand; although the rather melodramatic name is made use of from time to time by individuals bent on extortion. It is a great terrorizer. In this instance, the work is clearly that of one person. The affair looks simple. I'll get my vibrations easily enough; you just see if I don't! It isn't half so difficult as that interior epicycloid I was at work on last night. Be ready at three o'clock."

Until that time Astro the Seer was characteristically picturesque. Curious women listened to his talk about them in delight, men came with ill-disguised scorn and left the studio in admiration, and through it all he gazed into crystals, and intoned cabalistic words. When the last client, however, had disappeared, Astro threw off his turban and robe, yawned prodigiously, and became his real, alert, keen-eyed self. With Valeska Wynne he walked rapidly down Fifth Avenue, across Washington Square, and along Macdougal Street to number 950, where he found McGraw awaiting him in some impatience. At once the mask fell again over Astro's handsome poetic face; no summer saunterer seemed ever more idle or indifferent.

"Ah, here you are, sir," said the detective with evident relief as he tipped his hat to Valeska. "And here's the joint."

The house still showed signs of the recent outrage. The broken frames of the front windows were boarded up, and several beams held the tottering lumber in place. The sidewalk was not yet repaired, but had been hastily covered with loose planks. Evidently the bomb thrower had created a terrific disturbance. Every pane of glass in the building was shattered. As a result of the latest attempt upon Gallino's life, the whole top of the store was a mass of broken timber in front; the back part of the roof seemed not to have been disturbed. A small group of silent wide-eyed Italians hung about the place, eying the evidences of destruction in awe.

Astro scarcely gave the place a glance; but, accompanied by McGraw and Valeska, entered the store and spoke a few commonplaces to the proprietor, who, with hunted face, gazed anxiously at the officer. Valeska's eyes roamed vivaciously about the interior, taking in everything.

"Don't you suspect any one?" she asked Gallino at length.

"Yassa, ma'am, I do. I say it ees Tony, my ol' clerk. He ees no good, that-a boy. I fire 'im. That ees-a one week ago. I tell-a da cop; he say-a no. Tony, he live across da street right-a now. He blow me up-a for sure. You wait teel I catch-a heem!"

McGraw laughed easily. "The old man's nutty about it, that's all. We looked up Antonio's record. He had good alibis, too. Nothing to that theory."

Astro seemed to come out of his daze and began to take an interest in the chatter about him. "Well, Mr. McGraw," he announced, as he picked his way daintily among the débris, "I've seen what I care to inspect in this part of the building; now, if you will kindly leave me to wander about the place as I like, I may get those influences and manifestations that will enable me to use my crystals to good advantage."

The bulky officer immediately looked disappointed.

He had evidently expected the Master of Mysteries to announce the author of the crime at once; and therefore it was with an unwilling nod that he withdrew.

"I'd like to go up on the roof first," said Astro to the Italian merchant. "It was there, I believe, that the latest explosion occurred."

Gallino showed the way up to a trap-door in the rear, and left Valeska and her companion on the ruined roof.

"Ah, this is more like business!" he said. "Valeska, see what you can find around here that's interesting." Then he walked directly toward the blank wall of the adjoining building. This rose three stories above Gallino's roof, and against it lay a number of pieces of scantling, untouched by the explosion. Over these Astro bent in search, while Valeska, left to herself, inspected the hole that the dynamiter had torn in the middle front of the roof.

"Here we are!" came his voice enthusiastically a moment later. She ran over toward him in surprise, to find him gazing across at the buildings on the other side of the street. Between his thumb and forefinger he held a tiny object.

"I've got it!" he announced, and continued his inspection of the house across the way.

"Got what?" she asked.

"The whole secret, as far as that goes. But specifically, I've got what I came up here for. What did you come up for?"

"Because you did," she confessed. "And, too, on the chance of finding something."

"One doesn't solve mysteries that way, Valeska. There is no use looking for something unless you know what that something is. Have you decided how a bomb was exploded on top of this roof in broad daylight, with people watching the house? Until you've got that, you are nowhere."

"It might have been thrown from the top of a building up there."

"And anybody could have seen it. No. There was only one possible way, besides electric wiring, and here it is." He opened his hand and disclosed a small twisted bullet.

"Oh!" cried the girl. "They put the bomb there and then shot at it."

"Yes. Shot at it—and missed the first time. Now, here we find the place where the first bullet, going wild, hit this piece of scantling. This makes it merely a matter of surveying. If you will stand with the back of your head where the indentation of this bullet is, then sight across the approximate middle of the hole in the roof caused by the explosion, you will probably get some idea of where the bullet came from. What do you see?"

"Well, it might have been aimed from any one of those three windows over there, in the building next to the shirt factory. I should say it came from the second one, where the potted plant is."

"One of them, certainly," answered Astro. "But we shall have to investigate them all, if we are to be conscientious about it, and for that purpose I suggest we look up McGraw again."

As they went down-stairs, Valeska asked, "When did the first explosion occur?"

"At night."

"Then the bomb was merely hurled from the window?"

"Presumably. Nothing could be easier, and, of course, it could not be definitely seen or traced. But here is McGraw; so let us take advantage of his office."

The detective, though delighted to accompany Astro, and especially his pretty assistant, into the house across the street, belittled the possibilities of finding anything there. "I've been into every room on the block, and I saw nothing. But I ain't got the second sight, o' course. All I can say is, I hope you track 'em."

The party went up-stairs into a cheap lodging-house, accompanied by a frightened and voluble landlady, until they reached the third floor fronting on the street. McGraw knocked on the first door; but, getting no answer, motioned the landlady to unlock.

It was a small room, in great disorder, looking as if the tenant had suddenly taken his departure. The bed was unmade, the small bureau was covered with soiled linen, neckties, cigarette stubs, and the like, and a miscellaneous lot of shoes, magazines, newspapers, and rubbish were strewed on the floor. McGraw started to push his way in officiously; but the slim hand of the Seer detained him.

"Kindly wait outside a moment," he commanded. "My assistant and I would prefer to enter alone. The vibrations, you know," he murmured, with a smile. The moment the door was shut behind them, two pairs of eyes ransacked the place, hunting for the things they had already decided to find. Astro's were the first to come to rest on a pile of crumpled newspapers hastily thrown beneath the unkempt bed. In a flash he had seized them and was scanning them one by one. Finally he separated an *Era* from the rest of the sheets, turned it toward Valeska, and smiled. She saw that one page had been torn out.

"The advertising page," he remarked. He drew out the Black Hand letter and compared the torn scraps silently with the journal in his hand, nodded his head in confirmation, then silently opened the door.

"Who lives here?" he asked the woman of the house.

"Antonio Soroni."

Astro turned to the detective. "Arrest him to-night and bring him to my apartments at eight o'clock."

"Did he really do it?" asked McGraw eagerly.

Astro turned away without answering.

"Kindly don't put any questions to him," interrupted Valeska; "for he is now getting in touch with the psychic influences of the place."

"Now for the next room, please," announced the Master of Mysteries, as if suddenly wakening.

"Oh, that's vacant," said the landlady with arms akimbo. "A young girl had it until last Friday; but she's left."

Valeska turned at once. "When was the last explosion, did you say, Mr. McGraw?"

"Thursday."

"And when did you search these rooms?"

"Friday, miss. The girl was here when I came. Fine looker, too, she was. A sort of laundress or seamstress or clerk or something; out of work, she said."

"Well, better look her up too, McGraw," said Astro, "and bring her around with Antonio."

He walked into the empty room, and Valeska followed him. The plain-clothes man and the proprietress awaited patiently until they came out again, some fifteen minutes later. Their faces betrayed nothing whatever concerning their search.

"Now, the third door!" Astro's voice was sharp and commanding. The others pricked up their ears in expectation.

McGraw knocked; but there was no answer. He knocked again, and the listening party caught the sound of unintelligible cursing, heavy and befuddled. At this the officer took the key in haste, threw open the door, and looked inside, his hand on the butt of his revolver. One glance, and he had jumped inside, collaring the man on the bed.

"It's Bull O'Kennery, by all that's holy! Think o' meetin' you this way, Bull! Get up now, an' come along with us; for I've been huntin' you two weeks an' more! Where've you been spendin' your vacation, anyway?"

The prostrate man rubbed his thick knuckles into his eyes and expostulated brokenly with a maudlin drunken accent. In a jiffy McGraw had dragged him upright and placed him against the wall outside, snapping the bracelets on his wrists as he did so. Then the detective turned to Astro.

"This here's Bull, one o' the slickest dips in the burg. There's been a warrant out for his arrest for over two weeks now. He'll be the man we're after, too, most likely. Anyway, he'll have to go up and give an account."

Astro surveyed the disheveled prisoner nonchalantly, took up his hand, examined the palm, the lower lid of his eye, and listened to his heart-beats, his head against the man's chest. "Bah!" he exclaimed with a nauseated shrug of his shoulders, "he's been drunk for sixty hours. Take him away, McGraw. He makes me quite ill. I'll attend to the rest of this alone."

After the detective had led the wretch shuffling down the stairs, the palmist and Valeska entered the room and threw up the blinds. It was a sickening enough abode, smelling vilely of whisky, stale beer, and staler tobacco smoke. A sluggish kerosene lamp still burned weakly on the mantel. Amid the mass of tangled rubbish a bureau drawer stood half open. Astro strode over to it. With a sudden gesture he took out a box of twenty-two caliber cartridges; then a woman's pocketbook, a ten-dollar bill, a piece of old-fashioned paper fractional currency of fifty-cent denomination, and a horn-handled shoe-buttoner.

"I think we're getting at it now!" he exclaimed, his eyes alight with discovery.

"But, for heaven's sake, which one of them did it? Antonio? Bull O'Kennery? Or the girl? Or all three together?"

"Or none of them?" smiled Astro. Suddenly his mood changed as he weighed the bullet thoughtfully in his hand. "It's a very pretty piece of business," he went on. "What was it the old Frenchman said in his wisdom,—*Cherchez la femme?* I'm afraid Mr. Gallino across the street is up against it; unless—hum—well, we'll see what McGraw gets into his net by nightfall."

Valeska never questioned further than the Master wished to answer; for she knew that it merely disturbed the marvelous deductive powers of his brain while they were at work; then, too, he preferred her, as she was, so to speak, still in her student days, to work out her own clues. Later, in case she had erred, he indulgently pointed out her mistakes. It was in some such tacit understanding that they now left the Macdougal Street tenement and made their way back to Astro's cozy studio.

Once there, she could see from the way in which he donned his turban and robe, lighted his water-pipe, and disposed himself on the cushioned divan in his favorite corner, that he had already solved the problem to his own satisfaction. Above the top shelf a row of the ancient Toltec, laughing heads grinned down on him; farther on, brazen implements and slabs of marvelous jade wrought with hieroglyphics gleamed dully, adding their touch of mystery to the man beneath. On the table were the sheets of paper and the dividers and rule with which he had been plotting an intricate curve, and this work he again took up immediately. Valeska withdrew. After an hour's work, heedless of the passage of dinner-time, he smiled, carefully laid aside his instruments, and turned to a plaster cast hung against the wall.

"It is true, then, as I thought, about you, Monsieur Voltaire," he murmured, half aloud. "The line of the upper half of the perimeter of that right ear of yours is a logarithmic spiral, of which the equation is $x^2 = 2ab + y$." He threw back his head and yawned.

Valeska glided in. "McGraw has come with Antonio," she whispered, "and has been waiting half an hour; but I wouldn't interrupt you until you had finished your calculations. Shall I let them in now?"

Astro yawned again, luxuriously. "You are too indulgent of me, my dear girl, I'm very much afraid.

The delay may cost Signor Gallino a thousand dollars, possibly his life. Yes, you may show them in."

In another moment the officer appeared, leading by the sleeve a very badly frightened Italian. The moment the latter perceived the gorgeously picturesque figure of the palmist he rushed across the room and sank on the floor, clutching Astro by the knees.

"I no t'row-a da bomb!" he screamed. "I no t'row-a da bomb! *Sacrament'!* I spika da trut'! I no t'row-a bomb, signor! Gallino he give-a me da bounce, *si!* I shake-a-da fist in da face; bot I no t'row-a da bomb!" At that the tears streamed from his wild eyes.

Astro waved his hand impatiently, took up Antonio's hand, and began reading the palm, only to let it drop in a few moments.

"This young lady who roomed next to you," he said gently,—"you liked her, Antonio?"

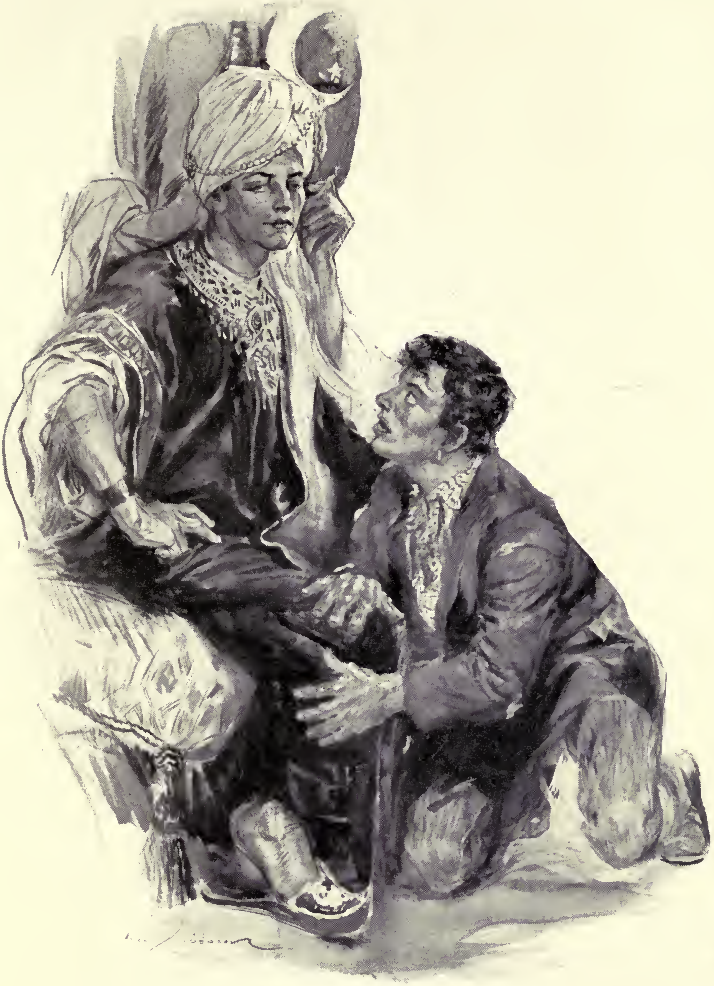
The accused's eyes beamed. "Ah, *si,* signor! She the fine-a, nice-a girl. She speak-a to me, nice!"

"Very often?"

"Ah, no, signor! She lock herself in da room all-a da time. Some eve she come-a in, get-a da match. Da's all. Read-a da pape', maybe, sometime."

Astro cast a quick significant look at Valeska under his dark brows. "When did she come in and tear out a page from *The Era,* Tony?"

Antonio scratched his head, laboring to remember. "Sometime dees-a last-a wik, early. *Si.* One night she come in, she say, 'Tony, I like-a get-a da posish. You lemme take-a do pape'. I brink 'er back.' I say 'No, I wanta-da pape' for read-a to-night.' She say, 'All-a right; I tear off da one piece.' "



"I no t'row-a da bomb!" he cried.

Astro turned to McGraw, "You'd better turn this poor fellow loose, I think. He's innocent enough. I know what I want to know now."

"What *do* you know?" said the detective peevishly. "Seems to me it's time I was put wise to some of this game, ain't it?"

"I'll tell you in ten minutes, if you'll telephone a question to headquarters, or to the proper precinct, and find out if there has been any complaint made of the loss of a pocketbook containing a ten-dollar bill, a fifty-cent piece of the old-fashioned paper currency, and a horn-handled shoe-buttoner. If there has, you'll want your friend Bull O'Kennery for that piece of work, too."

McGraw rose wonderingly and went to the telephone.

Astro called after him, "Tell them that if any one does appear with that complaint, to arrest him immediately and disarm him."

Valeska waited till the detective had gone into the hall. "It was the girl, then. I see!" she cried. "But how in the world did she ever expect to collect the money without being caught?"

"That's the cleverest part of it," answered the Seer meditatively. "You remember that she sent word to him the last time to have a thousand dollars with him night and day, and she'd let him know how to transfer the money?"

"Yes; but she hasn't let him know, so far."

"But she will to-night. You forget that to-morrow is the twelfth, the last day."

Valeska, extremely puzzled even yet as to how a lone girl was to accomplish her design, sat studying the matter over. Before she could reply, however, McGraw came back with an astonished look on his face.

"The girl called at the Mulberry Street Station yesterday and reported that her pocket had been picked. She described the money and the button-hook all right; and I guess if you say so it must be one of Bull's jobs. But it's too late to catch her, I'm afraid."

"What did she look like?" asked Astro.

"Why, that's funny. This Gallino happened to be there, talking to the sergeant about his place bein' blown up, and he recognized her as a girl that used to work in the corner drug store near him. She spoke to him a few minutes, and then left; and Gallino told the sergeant about it."

Astro clapped his hands. *"Selah!"* he exclaimed. "The ether waves have met at last! Wait five minutes. I must consult my crystals."

The two watched him carefully.

Finally he looked up. "We must hurry!" he exclaimed sharply. "To-night a man will come to see Gallino, and as soon as he's alone will demand the thousand dollars."

"A man?" queried Valeska. "I thought it was the girl."

"The girl!" said McGraw in bewilderment. "Well, never mind. Whoever it is, we'll get him—or her. The house is watched."

"Watched!" sneered the Master of Mysteries. "From the outside, I suppose?"

"Certainly," answered McGraw hotly.

"Fools!" answered Astro. "Anybody can enter. You can't keep innocent people out of the house. This man may go in, present a pistol at Gallino's head, get the money, and walk out. Who's to suspect a casual visitor?" He paused a moment to don his street coat. "Gallino may even be chloroformed. We've got to get there at once. Hurry!"

As they hastened along to the cab-stand, McGraw grunted in ill temper, "But who's the man that's after it, I'd like to know?"

He received no answer; nor was a word spoken all the time that they were being driven to Macdougal and Fourth Streets. When they had alighted there, paid their fare, and looked down the dark sidewalk, no one could be observed. Number 950 showed no sign of life. They started to walk briskly toward Gallino's, when suddenly a person emerged from the Italian's doorway and hastened down the steps.

Instantly Astro drew his revolver and shouted to McGraw, "That's the one! Get him!"

At the exclamation, the figure turned on the bottom step, shrank back in surprise, and becoming entangled in the long coat, fell across the balustrade to the stone sidewalk. Instantly, with a frightful roar, a terrific explosion rent the air. Astro and his companions staggered back, and above the crash of falling débris the Master of Mysteries could be heard shouting:

"That's what was meant for Gallino if he hadn't paid to-night!"

Then the three rushed anxiously forward to where the limp figure lay in a distorted knot on the flagging. The clothing had been torn to shreds, and a pool of blood encircled the prostrate form. The body lay face downward; so that the detective had to turn it over. He struck a match and cried in bewilderment:

"Why, it's a girl in man's clothes!"

Astro turned slowly away. "There will be no more bombs exploded in Macdougal Street for a while," he said. "You'd better telephone to the hospital."

THE FANSHAWE GHOST

AS it was nearly time for his first client of the day to arrive, Astro the Palmist ended the little lesson in optical anatomy he had been giving to Valeska. He closed the transparent doors of the huge model of the human eye about which he had been talking, and replaced it on a shelf in his laboratory, where it remained, a large livid ball of glass and porcelain, veined with red.

"It's simply wonderful!" Valeska said, staring at it hard.

Astro laughed, and passed into the great studio for his morning consultations. "And yet," he remarked, "Helmholtz says, 'Nature seems to have packed this organ with mistakes.' I'll explain that sometime. Most people do think that the body of man is the consummation of the Maker's skill and wisdom. In point of fact, it is far from being perfect.

"Think of the ants and bees," he went on thoughtfully. "Think of their strength and adaptability! By a mere change of diet a neuter can become a perfect female."

"Do you mean to say that men's bodies are not so good as some of the animals' bodies?" Valeska asked.

"I mean to say that the human machine is imperfect. It contains much that is unnecessary, much that is not well adapted to the struggle for existence."

Astro, now assuming his red silken robe and turban, in preparation for his astral readings, seated himself cross-legged on the divan, and took up the stem of his narghile.

"Wiedersheim," he continued, "has counted one hundred and seven so-called 'vestigial organs'; the remains, that is, of similar but more developed organs that fulfilled a useful function in our simian ancestors. Some of them are still able to perform their physiological functions in a more or less incomplete manner; some survive merely as ancestral relics; and some are actually harmful to the body. Take, for instance, superfluous hairs; they are no longer capable of protecting the body from cold and often do serious harm. Wisdom-teeth are unnecessary to man; their powers of mastication are feeble, and they often cause tumors and diffused suppuration and dental caries. We all know how unnecessary and how dangerous to health the vermiform appendix is.

"Then there are other organs whose powers are almost completely lost. The little tail disappears from the embryo before birth; but there remain the useless muscles of the ear, the unnecessary thirteenth pair of ribs, the weak and imperfect eleventh and twelfth pairs of ribs, which serve no useful purpose, the muscles of the toes, and so on. Why, the colon, or large intestine, the seat of most diseases of the alimentary tract and the nursery of arterial sclerosis, has been pronounced practically useless by Metchnikoff, and in London hospitals the entire colon is often removed."

Valeska stared. "But what are they all there for?" she inquired.

"I suppose their chief use is to shame our vanity.

They are undoubted proof of our animal origin, our descent from the anthropoid apes."

Valeska frowned. "I never like to be reminded of that."

"Well, then, of our descent from birds, or reptiles. You have beautiful eyes, my dear; but you can't conceal that little part near the nose which is called the 'semilunar fold'. That is but the remains of the third eyelid you possessed as a bird,—the transparent membrane that eagles draw over the cornea."

The bell rang outside. Astro the Philosopher became, on the instant, Astro the Seer, and dropped into his professional poise,—calm, inert, picturesque, oriental. Valeska retired to another room and began her work of looking carefully over the papers for news of anything that might be of use to the Seer in his conferences. It was her duty to keep in touch with the doings of the day.

For some time she read without interest, making notes occasionally, and from time to time consulting her card catalogue to look up the condensed biographies of persons prominent in society, politics, or finance, adding to the data there collected. She cut clippings, too, and pasted them in a blank book for Astro to look over at his leisure. In the last of the morning papers, her eyes fell on the following paragraph, and she read it with attention:

> No small amount of gossip has been occasioned during the last week or so in the little village of Vandyke, by the rumors of supernatural visitations at the well-known Fanshawe farm, now the residence of Miss Mildred Fanshawe, the last living representative of a prominent old family in the

> county. While all the servants at the farm deny the sensational reports, and Miss Fanshawe absolutely refuses to be interviewed, the stories afloat make the place famous in the vicinity. According to what can be learned, at least three of the servants at the farm have seen the "Fanshawe ghost," purported to be the spirit of Sally Towers, who was a well-known belle of New York in the 1830's. Sally appears, so it is said, in the walled garden side of the old house, usually with a baby in her arms. Occasionally she is seen on the roof of the dwelling. The Society for Psychical Research is said to be interested, and has asked the privilege of investigating the apparition; but Miss Fanshawe has persistently refused them admittance to the premises, which are now well guarded from intrusion.

Of Miss Fanshawe, Valeska could find no information in her catalogue. But as soon as Astro was free she gave him the clipping, and was not disappointed in his interest.

"It's a case I'd like to handle," he said, when he had read the story. "If Miss Fanshawe does not apply to me for a solution of the mystery, I shall certainly volunteer my services. Perhaps you had better send her a note, anyway."

This Valeska did forthwith, with the result that Miss Fanshawe appeared a few days later at the studio. She confessed herself worried about the stories that had been circulated, because of the unpleasant notoriety she had gained, and the fact that they might depreciate the value of the property, which she wished to sell as soon as possible. The rumors were, she confessed, based on tales which some of her servants had been indiscreet enough to relate. There seemed to be something at the bottom of the affair, and she would be much relieved to have the mystery cleared up.

Miss Mildred Fanshawe was an aristocratic but anemic-looking woman of perhaps thirty years. She was a brunette, with dark hair and eyes, with a lean narrow face, full of nervous energy. Her hands were long and slim; her upper lip was nearly covered with fine hair, almost a mustache, which gave her a distinctly Italian aspect. She talked freely with Astro and Valeska, using gestures like a foreigner.

When she had gone, Astro turned to his assistant. "Well," he said, "I'm curious to know just what you noticed about that woman."

"There is something strange about her—I hardly know what it is," said Valeska. "I noticed, though, for one thing, that she wiggled her ears. I knew a boy once who could do that. I've often tried to; but I can't. Then, her mustache was a great blemish, wasn't it? It's a pity for a woman to have to suffer that. Then, her eyes were queer. What was the matter with them?"

Astro smiled. "And I have been lecturing you upon the eye for a fortnight! It was the 'semilunar fold' I spoke to you about a while ago. It was extraordinarily large."

"So it was, now I recall it. That was funny about her being able to pick up a fork with her toes, like Stevenson at Vailima, wasn't it? I always wanted to live in a country where I could go barefooted. We don't half use our feet, do we?"

"Well—and the ghost? Have you no theory?" Astro asked.

"Already? Of course not! How can we tell anything till we investigate the premises and see the apparition?"

"Oh, we'll go down, of course; but it's scarcely necessary, I consider."

Valeska's hands fell into her lap with a hopeless gesture. "Oh, dear!" she exclaimed. "I'll *never* learn anything! How in the world could you learn the secret of the ghost story, just by talking to her?"

"And watching her?" he hinted. "But take her talk, even. What did she say that might be significant?"

"Do you mean about that operation she had for appendicitis?" Valeska considered it thoughtfully. "Let's see. She mentioned the fact that she had her vermiform appendix removed, and it proved to be abnormally large. But that doesn't prove anything to me."

"Think it over. See if you can't put it with what I have told you, and, more important still, read Metchnikoff! I recommend to you his *Prolongation of Life;* but I won't tell you what chapter especially. There you'll find the missing link in the argument. You have already half of my theory, in the doctrine of 'vestigial organs', which you can apply to Miss Fanshawe's case. The other half I prefer you to work out for yourself. It's the simplest kind of deduction, and needs only corroboration at Fanshawe Farm. Let's see; she asked us to come down next Friday. That gives you three days in which to think it over."

He rose and yawned. "I wish you'd buy me some blue paint and a brush," he added. "Now I must put in a little time on that new somnoform experiment. I think I'm getting at it."

But Valeska had no time to read Metchnikoff that week. Astro's absences from the studio were long and often, and Valeska, who had been preparing herself in palmistry, gave readings to all those clients who did not insist on a personal interview with the Master of Mysteries. It need scarcely be said that most such clients were men. Every moment of her time was occupied until Friday afternoon.

On that day, at four o'clock, she met Astro at the Grand Central Station, and together they took the train for Vandyke village to keep their appointment with Miss Fanshawe.

"How little I know of you, Valeska," Astro said, on the journey down. "Do you realize that it is almost nothing? You applied in answer to my advertisement for an assistant, and you know that it is not my habit to ask personal questions unless it is absolutely necessary. But, to me, you are as mysterious as this Fanshawe ghost we are hunting down. I have always had a queer feeling about you,—that I didn't want to know too much about your history; that it was a prettier situation to be ignorant of everything except this very happy present when we are working together."

"Oh, let's be sure of that, and enjoy it!" she breathed, turning her eyes away. "I am perfectly happy! I only hope that we both shall remain so!"

If Astro had intended by his remarks to give her an opening for a confession, she did not accept it, and he did not insist. Their talk changed to the business that occupied their immediate attention.

Astro carefully reread the newspaper clipping.

"The first thing is, of course, to get the accounts of the servants, and then to see the ghost for ourselves. Finally, we must lay the specter forever."

"I have thought that the phantom might have been impersonated by one of the servants," Valeska suggested.

"With that hypothesis we should seek a motive," he replied.

"I admit that's what has baffled me."

"Well, we must follow every clue, that's all."

Miss Fanshawe's man met them at the station with an open carriage, and Astro, seating himself beside the driver, immediately began to draw him out on the subject of the ghost. The man was Irish, and willing to talk. He himself, however, had not seen the spirit, though he believed implicitly in its existence. John, the stableman, had seen it, however, and Genevieve, Miss Fanshawe's maid. The third witness, an old woman who had been cook, had left the place, refusing to remain in a haunted house.

Miss Fanshawe greeted them hospitably and had them shown to their rooms by Genevieve. Before dressing for dinner Astro and Valeska had the story from her. She took them herself into the garden and pointed out the scene of the visitation.

A high brick wall screened the place from the street and enclosed it on three sides. The garden was laid out formally, with brick walks along the two axes of the rectangular space, and a circular pool with a fountain in the middle. The fourth side was shut off by the brick wall of the house itself, which there rose two stories in height. Along the south wall was planted a thicket of high bushes, interspersed with trees. This wall ran into the side of the house just below Miss

Fanshawe's own chamber, whose window showed some nine feet above. The maid's room was next. The northern wall was flush with the front of the house, which was decorated with a portico two stories in height. Above that was the sloping roof.

"I've seen it walking up and down many a time, from my window over there," said Genevieve. "It always disappears in the bushes over there," and she pointed to the southern wall. "Once I saw it on the very top of the roof, waving its arms. Yes, it almost always carries a baby, and it's always in white, shroud-like. It always scares me stiff; but I won't leave Miss Fanshawe for it nor anything like it."

"It's a queer thing that you and John are the only ones here who have ever seen it," said Valeska, looking at her fixedly.

"Oh, the cook has seen it, many's the time," said Genevieve.

"But the cook left."

"Yes, and good reason why, too! It came at her with a run once, and like to scratch her eyes out."

"It's queer that Miss Fanshawe has never seen it."

"Ah, and I hope she never will, the poor dear! It'll be for no good if she does. It comes to warn her, I'm thinking."

John the stableman's tale was almost the same. He, too, had seen the ghost on the roof of the house, and running swiftly along the garden walk, and often with the baby. In the year he had been employed at Fanshawe Farm he had seen it, he thought, at least a dozen times. He appeared to share Genevieve's superstitious terrors and had never dared to pursue the specter.

All this, of course, Miss Fanshawe had heard before, and with Astro and Valeska she discussed the probability of her servants possibly having conspired to give the house a bad name. But no motive for that was apparent, and Genevieve's devotion seemed sincere. The talk had already begun to wear on her. She showed many signs of nervousness, becoming at times almost hysterical. Seeing this, Astro changed the subject, and nothing more was said of his purpose there.

That night he took his place with Valeska at the end of the garden, away from the house, to watch. He had come prepared to spend several days; for the chances were against their seeing anything the first time, though the appearances had, according to John, become much more frequent of late. So, bundled in wraps, the two took their seats on a bench at the end of the path. From here, most of the house windows were screened from them; but a clear vista up the center of the garden was illuminated by a moon beyond its first quarter. Miss Fanshawe, pleading indisposition, had retired to her room early.

Beyond the seat there was a small door in the wall, opening on a path leading to the stable. Directly in front of where they sat was an old-fashioned sun-dial. It was altogether a romantic spot, one well fitted for a tryst, natural or supernatural. Perhaps Valeska thought it too romantic, for after sitting with Astro for a while she rose and paced impatiently up and down. He did not try to keep her with him. Her nearness seemed dangerous to his concentration of mind, to his watchfulness.

At ten o'clock a sound behind him attracted his attention. Valeska was some distance away, and he did not call her, but stole to the small door in the wall and looked out. What he saw made him smile. He returned and, with a low whistle, called his assistant.

"We might learn some things from Genevieve and John," he said a little sadly, "even if we don't learn much about the ghost from them."

"Have you seen them?" she exclaimed.

"They were bidding each other good night at the stable door."

"Then," said Valeska, "it's my opinion that we'll see the ghost within a quarter of an hour. Let's sit down now and watch."

They took their places on the bench again, and her hand stole into his. Was it the suggestion she had received from the servants' love-making, or did she begin to fear the specter? With all his cleverness, Astro could not decide.

But suddenly she sprang up, and now there was no doubt of her alarm.

"There it is!" she exclaimed in a harsh whisper, pointing toward the shrubbery at the south wall.

There it was at last, indeed,—a seemingly sheeted form, bearing something that looked like a little child in its arms, stealing down the path! It approached them noiselessly. In the shadow of the trees it showed too indistinct for identification at that distance. Astro rose abruptly and took a step toward the house, when immediately the thing sped rapidly away. Astro broke into a run; but when he came to the house nothing was to be seen.

He went back to reassure Valeska, who stood, staring, trembling with excitement, but without fear. Hardly had he reached her, however, when her voice rang out again.

"There! On the roof!" she cried.

Astro looked and beheld the figure gliding swiftly along the top of the building. The vision lasted only a moment, then disappeared.

He spoke sharply. "Valeska, run up to Miss Fanshawe's room and awaken her! Tell her I want her to see this!"

Valeska ran up the brick walk, passed through a door in the middle of the south wall, and entered the house. The halls had been left lighted, and she found her way easily to Miss Fanshawe's room. Here she knocked on the door, at first softly, then with increasing vehemence. Trying the door, she found it locked. No one answered.

She flew down-stairs again, and was about to go for Astro, when a sound attracted her attention. Down the hall, toward the back stairs, she saw something or some one pass and disappear. Her thoughts flew to Genevieve, and, with a new desire to awaken Miss Fanshawe, she went up-stairs again and knocked.

This time there was a noise inside the chamber,—a rattle, a chair being moved,—and in a few moments the door was partly opened and Miss Fanshawe looked out. At the same moment Genevieve appeared in the upper hall.

For a moment Valeska could not decide what to say. If, as she suspected, Genevieve had been, in some strange way, impersonating the phantom, she dared not tell of it before her. She slipped inside Miss Fanshawe's room, which was not lighted.

"We have seen the ghost, and Astro wished you to come out; but it is undoubtedly too late now. I wish your door had been unlocked, so I might have awakened you without making so much noise."

Miss Fanshawe wrung her hands. Her long black hair streamed over her white night-dress; the costume and her aspect of extreme disarray made her figure almost grotesque.

"It's terrible, terrible!" she moaned. "I don't see why I should be tortured so. I don't want to see it! I couldn't bear it!" She broke into a violent fit of sobbing.

Genevieve knocked at the door and entered. "I'll attend to her, miss," she said to Valeska. "I'm used to her when she has the hysterics, and I can calm her down if you'll only leave us."

There seemed nothing better to do, and Valeska went down-stairs and passed into the garden again. Astro strode up to her, a lighted cigar in his mouth.

"Well?"

Valeska narrated what had happened.

"We mustn't be caught that way again. I'll ask her to leave the door unlocked to-morrow night. Well, there's nothing further to do to-night. I propose that we turn in."

"But have you found out who or what it is?" Valeska asked, still trembling with the excitement.

Astro smiled. "I'll have a trap for the ghost to-morrow, and if she appears you'll see. It's only a question of how to do it delicately and safely. But it's most amusing. I think I was never so entertained."

"Why, did you see it after I left?" she asked.

"I should say I did! It was as good as a circus. But you must go to bed. Good night."

As they went out into the garden the next night, Astro showed Valeska a nickeled brass cylinder he had concealed in his inside pocket.

"Here's what an automobilist calls an oil gun," he explained. "It works like a large syringe, and is loaded with blue paint. I might also mention that the lightning-rod running up and down the house wall side of those windows is already painted bright blue. If I don't succeed in shooting our extremely lively little friend the spook with this gun, I expect the lightning-rod to streak her up with blue stripes sufficient for identification."

Valeska gazed at the moonlit house in wonder. "The lightning-rod!" she exclaimed. "It isn't possible for any one to climb up there! Do you mean to say—"

"Wait, and you'll see some of the prettiest ground and lofty tumbling outside of vaudeville," was his reply.

"But it runs up beside Genevieve's window! It isn't possible for that girl to climb down from there into the garden."

"It also runs beside Miss Fanshawe's window. It may be possible for her. I assure you, she's an athlete."

"But how could any human being get on the roof so quickly?"

"If you'll go round there, you'll see. Once you climb the north wall, you can almost reach the first balcony. Up the column to the second is easy enough.

On the other side there's a stout ivy vine that makes a practical ladder to the very top."

"But why, why, why?" Valeska almost wailed the words.

"Ah, you haven't read Metchnikoff."

Then, suddenly he cried, "Look!" and seized her arm.

They were standing beside the central pool now, and he pointed to Miss Fanshawe's window, clearly visible from this part of the garden. The moonlight struck the glass as the sash was raised. A form looked out, climbed rapidly across the sill, lowered itself till it hung by the hands, and then dropped lightly to the top of the garden wall. Quick as had been its appearance and disappearance, something was visible, tucked under one arm. While they stood fascinated, a white object appeared on the grass of the garden plot, the figure of a woman with hair streaming about her shoulders, apparently carrying a child. She came a few steps toward them, then retreated swiftly and made for the bushes by the north wall. In another instant she appeared atop the wall, and swung up to the first balcony of the portico, still bearing her burden. A few minutes more, and she reappeared on the roof.

"Quick, now!" cried Astro. "Run up to Miss Fanshawe's room and go in and wait for her to return. I'll hide in the bushes by the south wall and pop her full of blue paint. If I miss, there's the lightning-rod, her only way to enter the room."

"But what shall I say—how can I accuse her of it?"

Astro stopped suddenly and looked at her. "Why, my dear, I forgot. Is it possible you haven't guessed it yet? Miss Fanshawe is asleep. It's somnambulism, that's all. But hurry! Make any excuse if she's awake; if she's not, don't awaken her. Let her go to bed herself."

Valeska flew into the house and up-stairs. Miss Fanshawe had kept her promise and had left her door unlocked. Valeska entered.

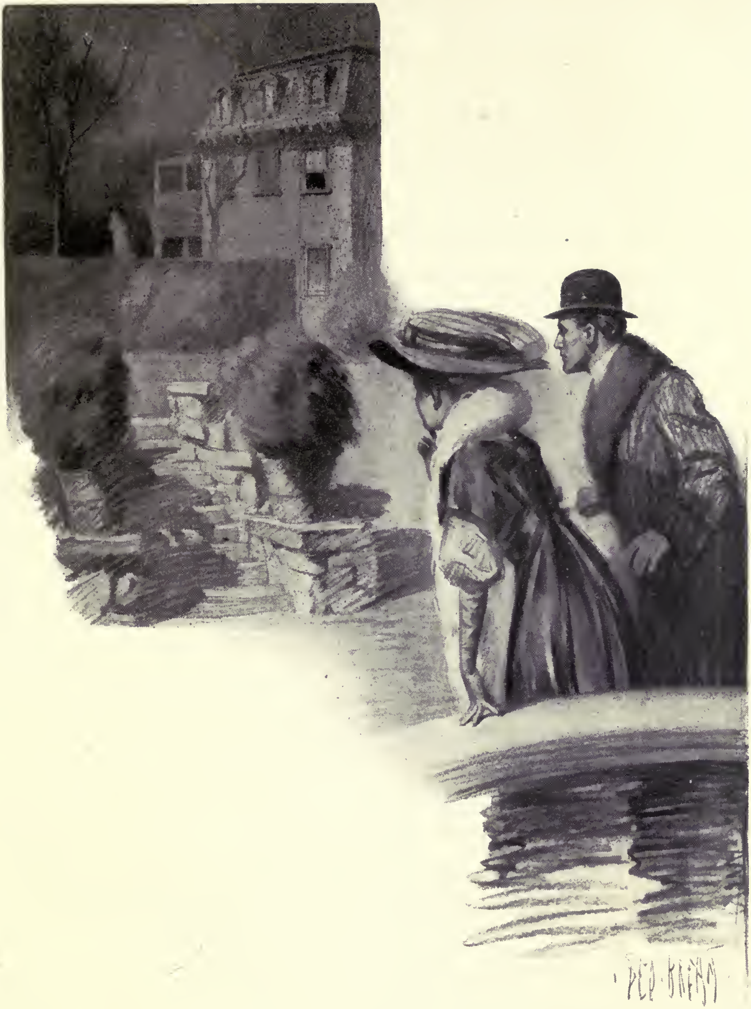
The window was still up. There was no one in the bed. One pillow was missing. On the instant Valeska understood the secret of the baby that the specter was supposed to carry.

She slipped into the corner and waited. In a few moments a form appeared in the window, blocking out the light. A wriggle and a twist, and it sprang lightly in, and Miss Fanshawe stood revealed in the moonlight, in her night-dress, now streaked and spattered with blue stains. In her arms she still held the pillow, as a mother holds her babe. Her eyes stared straight before her without power of sight.

Valeska, more moved by this uncanny vision than if it had been a supernatural visitation, stole silently away and rejoined the Master.

"I don't see how it was possible, even though I saw it with my own eyes!" she said, as they sat down on the bench to talk it over before sleeping. "A frail woman like that to climb to the second story up a rod, to the roof even! I've heard stories of somnambulists before, but this is miraculous!"

"If you had read Metchnikoff," said Astro, smoking calmly, "you would have found that such a case as this is not rare; and you would have discovered the explanation. The fact is that in somnambulism and in hysteria persons often revert atavistically to the char-



The white form sped down the garden wall.

acteristics of their simian ancestors. They are often able to jump and run and climb and even chatter like apes while in this abnormal condition. Miss Fanshawe, as we had already observed, possesses many still active functions of her monkey ancestry, which in most men and women have become atrophied with disuse. Her appendix was large, like those of the apes. She bore traces of this also in the hair on her lip, in her ability to use her ears, in the development of the muscles of her toes. It was evident to me, at my first glance at her, that she was, if not abnormal, at least peculiar. In her waking state, of course, she is a highly refined and cultured lady. Under the influence of hysteria, or in this strange somnambulistic condition, she merely reverts to type. You know that newborn babies can hang from their hands, like monkeys, but soon lose that power. Miss Fanshawe loses her extraordinary agility in her waking moments, and regains it while asleep."

"But why the blue paint?" said Valeska. "If you knew the secret of the Fanshawe ghost, why didn't you tell her at first?"

"Would you have believed it possible?" he asked smiling.

Valeska confessed she would not.

"Neither would Miss Fanshawe. And besides, it would have been necessary to explain the origin of my suspicions. No woman would care to be told that she resembled an ape, and I don't intend to explain Metchnikoff's theory to her or to point out her vestigial organs which are not quite vestigial. No, I'll merely tell her she walks in her sleep, as is proved by the blue paint on her night-dress, and advise her either to lock the window when she retires or to have a companion to watch her. I don't think any one will see the ghost again.

"I wonder," he added thoughtfully, as they walked toward the house, "if, after all, I hadn't better begin to investigate the ghost of *your* past, little girl!" He took her hand affectionately.

"Well, you won't find any vestigial signs in that, anyway," she answered, gently drawing away her hand. "And," she added, "I'm glad I can't wiggle my ears or pick up things with my toes. I'd rather be a lady even while asleep. I'm quite satisfied with my body, thank you, just as it is."

THE DENTON BOUDOIR MYSTERY

UNDERNEATH a shaded, swinging, bronze lamp in his favorite corner of the studio, the Master of Mysteries sat with half-closed eyes, seeming to drowse over a huge vellum-bound folio whose leaves bore lines of Arabic characters. But, though his dreamy eyes appeared heavy and dull, his index finger sped with such rapidity from line to line as to reveal that the palmist was eagerly absorbed in the message of those antique parchment pages. Behind him loomed the damasks and embroidered hangings with which the room was adorned; in a corner hung a gilded censer breathing its delicate aromatic perfume; an astrolabe occupied a small table at one hand, and near it lay a strange assortment of queer instruments picked up by the Seer in his vagabond travels,—the dread "spider" of the Inquisition, the *Angoise* "pear", a set of fearsome thumbscrews, strips of human hide, and other such horrors.

"So," he murmured contemplatively, "Ptolemy was a Torquemada himself, in a good many ways. That's interesting; and it confirms an old theory of mine. To think that many persons don't believe in metempsychosis—and do believe in the signs of the zodiac!" His thin lips parted in a smile.

He had turned to his book again, and had read for a few minutes, when his whole attitude changed. He sat upright; his eyes gleamed with interest. Voices were heard outside in the office, where his assistant was still working. He listened intently; then with a quick movement of his right hand touched a button, and the room was flooded with light. It was the first sight of a new client that often told Astro more than an hour's interview.

"Wait a moment till I announce you!" Valeska was exclaiming. "The Master can not be interrupted in his work. It is impossible. I could not do it for the President himself!"

"I must see him immediately! I tell you I must see him!" a man's voice replied. "By heaven! I'll break in by main force!"

Another moment, and the black velvet portières leading to the waiting-room were violently flung aside, and a flushed and excited young man of about thirty years strode into the apartment. Behind him the face of Valeska Wynne appeared in the doorway, with an alarmed expression.

Astro sat, in turban and silken robe, reading, apparently unmoved by this interruption. When the young man stopped in the center of the room, the Seer slowly raised his olive-hued face to the visitor, and a smoldering glance shot from his dark eyes, in a mute question. The young man took a few steps nearer, and broke out again:

"See here! You've got to take this case!" he exclaimed appealingly. "I am at my wits' ends. I'll go mad if you don't help me; no one else can solve it. You're the only man in New York that can explain this mystery. For God's sake, sir, tell me you'll do it!" He dropped in exhaustion into an armchair, looking anxiously at the crystal-gazer. The fingers of one hand twitched nervously, while his other fist was clenched. His forehead was lined with vertical wrinkles.

Astro, still unperturbed, looked at him gravely, his quick eye darting from point to point of the young man's clothing. Finally he said languidly, with an almost imperceptible foreign accent, "My dear sir, the Turks have a proverb, 'He who is in a hurry is already half mad.' If you were in such haste to see me, you should have taken a cab to come here, instead of a street-car."

The young man pulled himself together, sat up, and stared hard at the Seer. Then his face relaxed, as he said, with a tone of great relief, nodding his head, "That's wonderful! It's exactly what I did. Oh, I know you can do it, if you only will! The police are all stupid,—there isn't a man with a brain on the whole force, I believe. You're the man to help me!"

Astro made a graceful gesture with his long slender hand. "It is not a question of brains, my dear sir. It is a question of the right comprehension of the forces of the occult, of undeveloped senses and powers. Men need sign-boards to show them the way from town to town. The birds wing their straight paths by instinct. It is my fortune to be sensitive to vibrations that most minds do not register. Where you see a body, I see a spirit, a life, an invisible color. All these esoteric laws have been known by the priestcraft of the occult for ages. Nothing is hidden from the Inner Eye."

"I don't know how you get it," the young man interrupted. "I believe that there are many things we don't understand yet, and that some men are developed beyond their fellows. I've studied mysticism myself, and that's why I came directly to you. I want the mystery of my sweetheart's death cleared up, and the hellish scoundrel that killed her executed. Until that is accomplished, my life will stop, or I'll go insane. The police can prove nothing, even on their own suspect. What motive there could have been for such a crime I can't imagine; it seems so unnecessary, so monstrous!" He had worked himself again into a fever of excitement.

Astro rose and walked over to his visitor. Placing his thumbs on two muscles in the young man's neck, near the spinal column, he manipulated the flesh for a few moments. His client's hysteria gradually subsided, and he became calmer.

"Now," said Astro, sinking back into his chair and taking up the amber mouthpiece of his water-pipe, "give me the details of your story from the beginning. You need not mind my assistant; she is quite in my confidence and may be trusted implicitly."

Valeska had entered, and sat at a table prepared to take notes of the conversation. Astro's eyes turned indulgently on the pretty blond head as it bent seriously over the writing pad.

The young man spoke now as if he had the history already clearly mapped out in his mind. He used occasional impulsive gestures, displaying an ardent and intense temperament.

"My name is Edward Masson. For three months I have been engaged to marry Miss Elizabeth Denton, of Hamphurst, Long Island. That is, I was, until three days ago, when we had a quarrel,—nothing to speak of, really, you know, but the match was temporarily broken off. It would have come out all right, I'm sure. I intended to make it up with her. I was prepared to make any compromise whatever; for I was crazy about her. She was my whole life." He paused and put his hands across his eyes.

Valeska looked across to the Master, her own eyes already swimming with tears of sympathy. Astro, however, showed no sign, and puffed tranquilly at his hookah, waiting for Masson to become more calm. In the anteroom a great clock broke the silence with a ringing melodious chime and struck the hour of six in booming notes.

Masson looked up with a tense face. "That next day she was murdered!" he said brokenly. "She was found dead in her boudoir on the second floor of her house, just before dinner-time, at about dusk. Both doors were locked; but the double windows were open. The police say she was strangled. Think of it! God! she was beautiful! How could any one have done it? It seems impossible, even now that she is dead. There were slight marks on her throat that looked like finger prints. I didn't see them,—there was lace around her neck when I saw her, in her casket. Oh, God!" He rose and paced up and down the room restlessly, his eyes cast down.

"What have the police done?" Astro inquired gently.

"They've arrested Miss Denton's maid. She had a key to Elizabeth's room, it seems, and some of the servants thought they heard her talking in the room.

I think that's the strongest point against her. But I doubt if she did it. It was too brutal. I must run down the real murderer and have it proved beyond the possibility of a doubt. I can't rest till that's done."

He turned almost savagely to the quiet figure of the palmist. "Can't you do it? You can see things in crystals; you know the secret laws of nature; you lead a life of study and research with the old adepts. Can't you do this for me?"

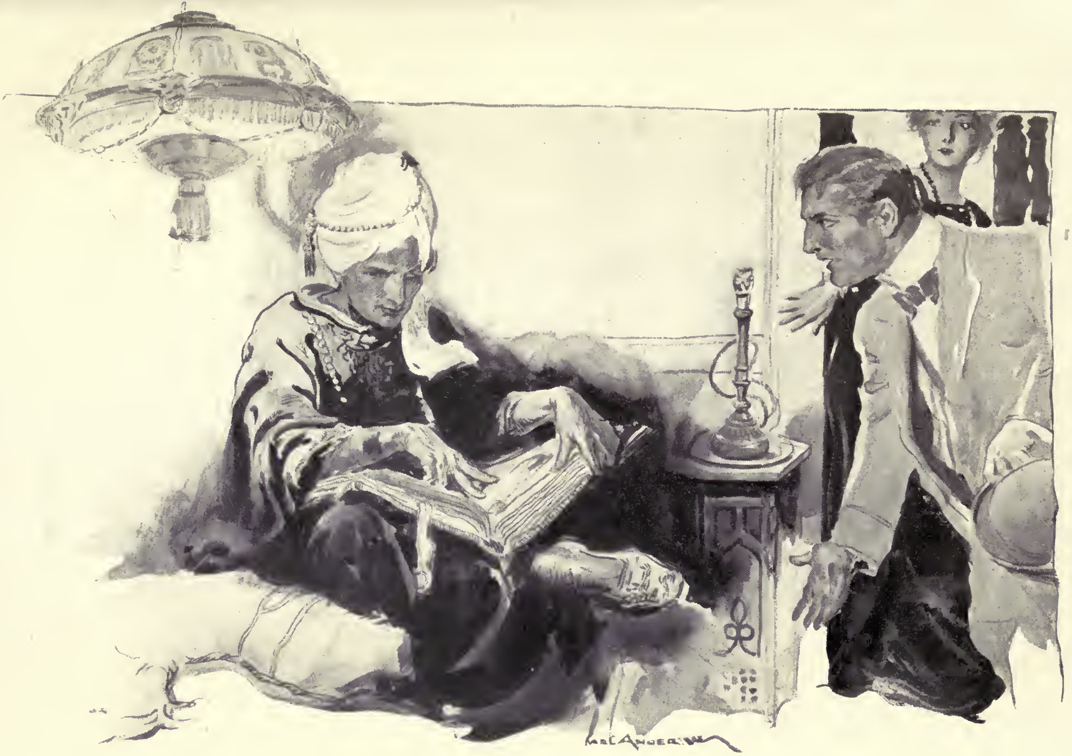
Astro smiled subtly. "My dear Mr. Masson," he said, "I do not ordinarily concern myself with such affairs. Those who wish come to me, and I, of my knowledge of the Laws of Being, can reveal what is hidden. Such agonizing experiences as yours are distracting to the student of the Higher Way."

"I'm rich!" Masson broke in. "I'll pay you anything you wish! Make your price—one thousand, two, anything! Only help me! My God, man! you were a part of the world once. Can't you remember what it means to love a beautiful woman and want to marry her?"

"I remember—only too well. It was partly on that account that I hesitated. But I'll forget myself and consent to assist you."

The young man sank into a chair again, with gratitude in his poise. "You'll want to go down to Hamphurst?" he asked.

"Certainly. I must get the vibrations of the scene itself before I seek the murderer. He has left behind him emanations that will rapidly evaporate. I shall go down to-morrow if you will accompany me. To-night I shall go to the Tombs and see Miss Denton's maid. She, too, must be studied by one who is sensi-



"Can't you remember what it means to love a beautiful woman?"

tive to aura. My friend McGraw will be able to get permission for that, no doubt."

He shot a glance at Valeska as he mentioned the inspector's name. She replied with a fluttering smile and was serious again.

Young Masson buttoned up his overcoat, and with an embarrassed, hesitating manner, did his best to express his thanks. Astro cut short his stammering sentences, laid his own hand with a friendly gesture on Masson's shoulder, and guided him out of the room. At parting it was agreed that they should meet on the nine-twelve train for Hamphurst.

The palmist walked back to the studio, shut off all lights but the one in his favorite corner, and sat down in silence. Valeska waited for him to speak.

"Not bad for two days' work," he said finally, smiling.

"Are you sure you can do it?" she asked, raising her golden brows.

"My dear," he replied, taking up his water-pipe again, "am I not a Mahatma of the Fourth Sphere, and were not the divine laws of cosmic life revealed to me while I was a chela on the heights of the Himalayas?"

Valeska broke into a silvery laugh. "Do you know," she said, "that patter of yours is almost as becoming as that turban and robe. But, to be serious, have you any clue as yet?"

Astro did not answer for a moment; then he said meaningly, "The principle by which muscle reading can be accomplished is this: The person that is held moves in a minute circle until he finds the point of least resistance to his motion. He moves, then, in this line as long as his holders unconsciously guide him in that direction. The same principle is true of any problem of this sort. Let us wait, until we are guided by something that seems characteristic of this special crime. The street-car business was simple enough to you, I suppose?"

Valeska pouted. "Oh, I'm not altogether a fool. Why, he had a Broadway transfer in his hand when he came in here. He was in too much of a hurry to take a cross-town car for the four blocks."

The Seer chuckled. "But now we'd better go to work. I'll see the maid first. There's no need of your going. You'd better get back to your work on the zodiac. Look up Napoleon's notes on the subject. His was the biggest intellect the stars ever fooled. It will teach you how to fool lesser ones. But get a good night's rest. There'll be something more to search for at Hamphurst to-morrow. I'll look over the papers and see what is known about this murder. Masson was too excited to tell half."

After reading for a half-hour, Astro yawned, shook himself, and changed from the cynical psychologist to a man of keen brisk manner and alert glance. His green limousine, which was always kept waiting at the door of the studio, took him rapidly down-town. A half-hour later he was looking through the cell door at Marie Dubois, the French maid of the late Miss Denton.

She was eager to talk and volubly protested her innocence. Astro let her run on without questions, until she had finally told all she knew of the affair, which was little enough, apparently. She had started up to Miss Denton's room at about half past six to get a cashmere shawl which was to be sent to the cleaner's. Half-way up the side stairs she had stopped, hearing voices inside the boudoir. She did not, however, recognize Miss Denton's voice; instead, there was a higher-pitched voice, exclaiming "Great God!" several times. This was followed by laughter; then came a shrill whistle. She heard something like the fall of a body, then footsteps. All this so alarmed her that she ran up and tried the boudoir door. Finding that locked, she called down to the butler, went and got her own key, and asked him to investigate. The voice she had heard seemed like an old woman's. The butler had heard it, and also the chauffeur, who was in the stable across the yard.

"And how about the letters from Mr. Masson to Miss Denton, which were found in your room?" Astro inquired.

"Oh, Mees Denton, she give me zem zat I send to her fiancé!" the girl protested. "Zat same afternoon she make ze *paquet. Mon Dieu!* ze police say I steal ze letters! It ees not so! Nevaire have I seen a man so good like Monsieur Masson to me. He ees gentleman. Why I steal his letters?" She began to weep.

"Let me see your hand, Marie."

The girl gave him a slender trembling palm. Astro looked at it for a few moments; then he said, "Marie, did Mr. Masson ever make love to you?"

A sudden wave of color flooded the girl's face; but she cried out excitedly, "Nevaire! *Mon Dieu! non, par exemple!* Why should he do zat? Had he not ze beautiful Mees Denton? *Oh, non, Monsieur!*"

Astro smiled cryptically and walked out. The rest of the evening he spent translating certain obscure

Hebrew texts from the *Midrash* and comparing them with the published English versions.

On the train down to Hamphurst, next day, Masson was morose and talked but little. He was nervous and impatient to get to the house, watching sullenly out of the window all the way. Valeska did her best to be agreeable; but Astro came out of his reverie only once, to ask:

"Why was the date of your marriage postponed, Mr. Masson?"

Masson scowled, then sighed and shook his head.

"Miss Denton, a month or so ago, was not at all well. The doctors found her heart to be weak. They thought that the excitement of a wedding and its preparation would be too much for her, and feared a collapse."

Astro resumed his abstracted pose. Valeska bent her brows. Masson gazed mournfully out of the window.

Alighting at Hamphurst, they took a carriage and were driven to the Denton house, an old-fashioned, two-and-a-half-story, frame building, painted yellow with white trimmings. It was surrounded with beautiful wine-glass elms which were scattered over the grounds. A wide lawn stretched in front and on one side, with a gravel driveway to the residence and a stable in the rear. The place had an air of quiet peaceful respectability. It seemed to the last degree improbable as the scene of such a tragedy as had been so recently enacted.

The officers had finished their investigations, and the funeral had taken place the day before. An aged aunt of Miss Denton's and the four servants now occupied the house. Astro and his assistant were introduced to the old lady, then went immediately up to the boudoir where the body had been found. Here, at Astro's request, the exact situation discovered at that time was explained by James, the man-of-all-work, whom Marie had referred to as the butler.

He pointed out the position in which he had found the corpse. It lay face downward; the hair was somewhat disarranged. The square, cheerful, blue-and-white boudoir was now filled with sunlight streaming in from the high French windows which led to a small balcony outside. Many of Miss Denton's belongings still lay about,—a fold of ribbon, a lace collar, a handkerchief on the bureau; and on a small table, a book face down where she had left it, made it seem as if the owner had only just left the room on some trifling errand.

The old lady silently handed Astro a photograph of her niece,—a beautiful woman of twenty-three, with the frank and winning expression of a young girl. Astro handed it to Valeska, who looked at it in admiration and regret. The aunt explained further that her niece Elizabeth was in a low-necked, white mull dress. She had come down for dinner; but, finding that she had forgotten her handkerchief, had gone back up-stairs to get it. She had not hurried, as dinner had not yet been served. Her aunt did not think it strange that Elizabeth did not return for ten or fifteen minutes. Then she had heard Marie scream to James, and she herself had followed him up, and had been there when he opened the door.

The old lady was too overcome to go further; but James corroborated Masson's previous story. Both doors had been locked and the keys withdrawn. The windows were open. No footprints or traces of any kind had been found outside by the police. James himself had been in the lower front hall at the time, rolling up some rugs, and had heard the sound of voices up-stairs, and had wondered at them. One voice, he thought, sounded much like Marie's. It was about three minutes, he thought, between the time when he heard the voice and the laughter—for he had heard that also—to the moment when Marie called for him to come up. She had appeared much excited.

He was a simple-faced fellow, with an awkward air and a generally shiftless appearance,—the ordinary country youth who has had too little energy to better himself in any way. Astro scarcely gave him a glance, but stood gazing at the door in front of him.

He made a sign finally, and all but Valeska left the room. She shut the door behind them. Then she followed his eyes about the walls and floor.

"I think," said Astro, thoughtfully regarding the window-frame, "that Masson regrets exceedingly having tried to kiss Marie about four days ago. Poor chap!"

Valeska's eyes narrowed. "Oh!" she said. "That was what broke off the engagement?"

"I'm afraid so."

"But was Marie in love with him, too?" she asked eagerly.

Astro's expression was more animated as he replied, "I love, thou lovest, he loves; we love, you love, they love. I think, my dear, that in matters of the heart you know the symptoms better than I, although you were *not* taught the philosophy of the Yogis by a Hindu fakir. What do you say, pretty priestess?"

"Masson was sincerely in love with Miss Denton. He never cared a snap for Marie."

"I believe you. And yet he kissed her—or tried to. There was no mistaking that blush. It is a common error to suppose that French girls are a whit less modest than their English or American sisters. In point of fact, they are often more so,—more ignorant, more innocent. Marie was carefully brought up; she is still a child. But the Latin races have temperament; they soon learn. Marie is a passionate little thing, quick at loving as at hating, full of revenges and regrets."

"But what has that kiss to do with this murder?"

"That's precisely what I'm here to find out. Permit me to resume my meditation, that my astral vision may be released."

Valeska smiled, and kept silent. It was Astro's way of requesting that he was not to be questioned further until he himself had run down his clue.

It was a quarter of an hour before he spoke; then to say in triumph, "Ho! I have found it! I have at least solved half the mystery." He pointed to three parallel scratches on the frieze, above the picture-molding.

Valeska shook her head, puzzled.

He shrugged his shoulders and went to the window, pointing to a tiny spot on the white frame.

"It's blood!" exclaimed Valeska.

"It's blood; and yet Miss Denton was strangled, and no blood was shed,—none, at least, of hers."

"Whose blood, then, was it?"

"Kindly get out of the window on the balcony, my dear."

She stepped over the low sill, unconsciously placing her left hand on the frame to steady herself. Her fingers touched the paint about two inches below the bloody smutch.

"Well, my dear, it certainly isn't your blood, at least," said Astro.

"Marie's, then? She is taller than I."

"She had no wound on her hand. I examined them both carefully."

"And there was none on James'."

"Nor the aunt's. If you have looked all you wish to, you might go down to the kitchen and talk to the cook. It was said in the paper that she had a bad temper, and had lately quarreled with Miss Denton. To be sure, all good cooks have bad tempers; but, as the police didn't see fit to arrest her, she may possibly be the murderer. See what you can do. I shall remain here for a while. There's much to be done, and I'm in a hurry to earn my thousand dollars."

When Valeska had left, Astro resumed his study of the room, going over it inch by inch, looking again at the window, finally turning to the balcony. The care with which he worked showed that the Master of Mysteries was unusually perplexed. After examining the floor and rail of the balcony, he drew a bird glass from his pocket and spent a half-hour gazing at the elm whose branches stretched toward the window. Off the balcony was another window, from the room next to the boudoir. This, too, he examined carefully. Then he smiled slightly, put up the glass, and reentered the room. It was evident that he had found what he had sought.

Descending to the lower hall, he gave a quick look at doors and windows, then went out into the yard in the rear to the base of the tree he had spent so much time in investigating. He looked now up, and then down. He gazed up at the two windows of the balcony. His eyes were on the great door of the stable when Valeska appeared, her eyes shining.

"The cook has a cut on her left forefinger!" she announced breathlessly. "The second girl says that, just before they discovered the crime, the cook was away from the kitchen for about fifteen minutes. The cook herself says that she had gone out back of the stable to get a few strawberries for her own supper."

"Did she come back with the berries?"

"Yes; but she might have picked them before."

"What shape was the cut on her finger?"

"Why, it was a straight cut, of course. She said she did it slicing ham. But you know she might have gone up-stairs and into the guest-room, which has a window on the same balcony, and—"

"What about the second girl?" Astro interrupted.

Valeska laughed. "She's a country girl, awfully, awfully in love with James. She's frightened to death for fear that he'll be suspected of the murder."

"Did she hear the voices and the laughter?"

"No. Anyway, she was with the aunt most of the time, in the dining-room. It was the cook who did it, I'm sure."

"And how about the whistle? And why should the cook laugh at such a time?"

Valeska's face fell. "Well," she said finally, "for that matter why should any murderer laugh? The whistle might have been a signal to some one outside."

"Except that, in this case, it wasn't. My dear, the laughter and the whistle are the easiest parts of the mystery. What I want to know is, where is the key to the door? It was in the lock when Miss Denton went up-stairs the second time."

"Where, indeed, is it? That would show a good deal."

"If you'll come with me, I'll show it to you. But first I think we had better get Mr. Masson. I may need a little help in a few moments. Will you kindly call him? I'll be in the stable."

As Valeska left, the palmist strolled slowly over to the stable and looked in the great door. In the center of the floor stood a large brown touring-car. A young man in overalls was polishing the brass work.

Astro nodded. "A very fine-looking machine," he offered. "A Lachmore, isn't it?"

The chauffeur grunted and kept on with his work.

"I am a friend of Mr. Masson's," Astro went on, "and I should like to look over this car. I am thinking of getting one myself some day."

Still the young man did not answer except by inarticulate grunts.

Astro drew nearer. "What's the matter with your finger?" he asked abruptly.

The young man looked up, now angrily, as if about to make a discourteous retort. Seeing Masson approaching, however, he replied, "Oh, it got jammed in the machine a day or two ago. What's that to you?"

"I'd like to see it. I can cure it. I am a healer."

Astro extended his hand suavely.

The young man scowled darkly. "Oh, it's not much. No need of bothering you."

By this time Masson had entered with Valeska.

"Mr. Masson," said the Seer, "this young man interests me very much. I have been conscious ever since I arrived at Hamphurst of certain very harsh and painful vibrations. In the boudoir, these grew more intense. I felt something in that room that was neither an odor nor a color, but partook of the nature of both. Now, singularly enough, I find the same influence here, only more active and vibrant. This young man has a peculiar aura. I wonder that you can not perceive it even with one of your five material senses."

The young man stared, more and more uncomfortable at the talk. Finally he dropped his rag, walked round to the back of the car, and took up a heavy wrench.

Astro raised his voice slightly. "Mr. Masson," he said, "I can see this fellow's astral body as well as his material frame. Now, I notice on the forefinger of his left hand, in its astral condition, a small V-shaped cut. I am very anxious to know whether such a corresponding wound is to be found on his fleshly hand. Do you think you could induce him to remove that bandage?"

Masson, mystified, but evidently comprehending that something important was at stake, raised his voice. "Walters," he said, "kindly oblige me by removing that rag from your left hand."

Walters looked up surlily. "I can't, Mr. Masson. It would make it bleed again. It bled like anything when I jammed it in the machine."

"My friend," said Astro genially, "jammed wounds do not bleed to any extent. It is a V-shaped scar then?"

"What of it?" The chauffeur stood poised in a sinister attitude.

"That's what I want to know, too," cried Masson. "By heaven! do you mean that this fellow here had anything—"

Astro raised his hand. "One moment," he interrupted. "First, I want to ask you, Walters, to show me where the gasoline tank is in this car?"

A look of terror swept over the young man's face. He raised the wrench in his hand and rushed at the palmist. Astro avoided him lithely and grappled with him. The man struck out, tore himself free, and dashed for the door. He would have made his escape had not Masson jumped for him. There was another scuffle. Masson, now convinced that he had his sweetheart's murderer before him, fought like a maniac. Astro, who had been thrown to the ground by the force of the blow he had received, now rose, and the next moment drew out a revolver and covered his prisoner.

"Let go, or I shoot you like a dog!" he barked out between his teeth. "Let him go, Masson! This is not for you. The law will attend to him. The man's evil enough; but not so bad as you think. He's no murderer, really."

At these words Walters turned to Astro with a gleam of hope in his eye. "Oh, I'm not, sir! Before God, I had no intention of murdering her! I didn't know I had till afterward. I only tried to keep her from screaming, and she dropped like a log. It was that accursed parrot! Miss Denton was frightened to death, sir, and so was I, pretty near."

Astro spoke sharply. "Valeska, get that halter, and I'll fasten him so he'll be safe till the police can get here."

"A parrot," ejaculated Valeska, as she brought the halter. "Ah, I see! That accounts for the strange, high-pitched voice, the laughter, and the whistling!"

"Get up now, and tell your story!" commanded Astro. "And remember that you speak in the presence of one to whom everything is revealed. At the slightest departure from the truth I shall feel instantly the shifting of your spectrum, and a change in the amplitude of your vibrations. In my crystals I saw the scene; but it was dusk, and the glass was cloudy. Tell me exactly what happened, and if it coincides with my vision you shall have my help in your trial."

"I'll tell the truth, so help me God!" cried Walters. "Listen! It was this way. It was only her money I was after. I had planned it for a week back, knowing just when she left the room empty. I got up the side stairs, and out on the balcony, and into the tree where I could watch her. As soon as she finished dressing and put out the light and went down-stairs, I slid on to the balcony and slipped into the room. Well, I had got her purse and emptied it, when all of a sudden the door opened, and in she came; for I hadn't thought to lock it. She gave a little scream at seeing me there in the dusk, and I grabbed her to keep her from making more noise. Just then Hades seemed to break loose all around me. There was a voice yelling, 'Great God! Great God!' and then something feathery came scratching and flapping into my face. I put out one hand to ward it off, and got a bite that made me drop my hold of the lady. Then as she fell to the floor, there was a laugh that made my blood run cold. It laughed and laughed fit to kill. I couldn't stand it! I didn't care whether I was caught or not then; I locked the door, climbed out on the tree and got down to the ground. I didn't dare to run away, for fear I'd be suspected! but after I heard how it came out it was all I could stand to stay here. I didn't know what to do about Marie; but I hoped she'd get off some way, for I knew they never could prove it on her. And that's the truth, so help me God! Where the parrot came from I have no idea."

"It belongs in the next neighbor's house, and has been missing for a week," said Masson. "Now I'll go and telephone to the police."

He stopped a moment and looked wistfully at the Seer. "Ah, I knew you could do it," he said. "I wish you could tell me now how ever to be happy again."

"There is no such thing as happiness, my friend," said Astro seriously. "There is no joy but calm, the Eastern books say."

Masson bowed his head. Then, as he left, he remarked, "I shall send you a check in the morning. You will see if I am not grateful."

"What I don't see is, how you knew the key was in the gasoline tank of the auto?" Valeska asked him, on the way to town.

"I am not yet sure that it was, but can you think of any safer place for a chauffeur to hide it?" Astro replied with a smile.

THE LORSSON ELOPEMENT

THE Master of Mysteries entered the great studio smiling, and, without removing his overcoat or silk hat, threw himself on the divan and chuckled.

Valeska looked up from her desk with a question in her eyes, though she did not speak. As Astro did not seem inclined to answer, she resumed her work with the finger prints. Each one of these, printed in pale red ink on a small sheet of bristol board, she examined carefully, then with a pencil she traced out the primary figure formed by the capillary lines, starting from the microscopic triangle on the inside of the finger, where the lines, coming from the back, first separated, and then following the curve till it met the corresponding little triangle or "island" on the outside of the finger. The axes of this diagram were then drawn, and the pattern thus defined was entered on the card index as an "invaded loop", an "arched spiral", or a "whorl", according to Galton's classification.

So absorbing was her work that it took her whole attention, and she did not think again of her employer until he spoke aloud. He had thrown off his overcoat and put on his oriental turban and his red silk robe to be ready for patrons. No visitors had yet appeared to interview the palmist, however, and Astro was lazily puffing his narghile.

"Valeska," he said at last, between two long inhalations of the water-pipe, "did you ever try to put out a fire in the grate by covering the front with a blower?"

She laid down her pencil and looked up smiling. "Why, no. It only makes the fire burn the hotter, doesn't it?"

He nodded his head gravely. "Precisely. And yet that's what Mrs. Lorsson is doing with her daughter Ruth."

Valeska waited for something more.

"I had an interesting time there to-day," he went on. "There were a dozen or more pretty well-known society women at her tea, and they were all crazy to have me read their palms, of course. That was all stupid enough, until Ruth Lorsson came in. Have you ever seen her?"

"Oh, yes," said Valeska. "A pretty girl of about eighteen, with dark eyes and dark hair, isn't she? She always looks so innocent that I want to pet her."

"You needn't worry. She has somebody to pet her, if I'm not mistaken. And as for being timid and innocent; well, you never can tell by the looks; that is, unless you see what I saw." He smiled again mysteriously.

"Is she in love then?" Valeska asked.

"Without doubt, by her handwriting, which I saw a sample of—you should have seen the double curve in the crossing of her t's—and by her heart line, too, for that matter; and by her general appearance and demeanor, most decidedly. But I had better proof than all that."

"Why, was *he* there? I could have told in an instant, I'm sure."

"No, *he* wasn't there; but another man was; and, though it was evident that Mrs. Lorsson considers him eligible and is trying to make a match of it, Ruth hates him. Of course you or any bright woman could have seen that as well as I."

"Then how did you find out specifically?"

"Why, in a surreptitious way, I must admit. You know that Mrs. Lorsson wanted to exploit me as the latest fad, and she insisted that I should come in costume. Very well, I was willing to oblige. Mrs. Larsson is rich and influential, and I made out my bill accordingly.

"Well, I was shown up into Miss Ruth's room to dress. There on her secretary I happened to see her blotter covered with figures. If it had been writing, I shouldn't have read it; but I confess that that list of numbers piqued my curiosity, and I looked at it. It wasn't a sum, or anything like that. It occurred to me at first glance that it was a cipher. I don't know why—perhaps because the thing seemed so meaningless. At any rate, it interested me, and I made a copy. Here it is."

He pulled out a note-book and showed Valeska the list:

3	36	91
4	36	91
5	36	91

1	81	91
11	61	91

2	101	91
43	98	91

8	341	91
71	96	91

"What do you make of it?"

"Why, nothing as yet. It's absolutely meaningless." Valeska looked up.

"I agree with you so far. But let me tell you the rest of the story. Ruth is, as you know, a very pretty young girl; but she's more than that—she's clever. Of course the cleverness of eighteen isn't quite so deep as the cleverness of maturity; but I think she is intelligent enough to keep that stepmother of hers guessing. Of course one of the first things I said was that she was in love. Her stepmother denied it so indignantly that I immediately smelled a mouse. Ruth didn't betray herself; but I noticed that the young man who was present immediately began to take notice. He is Sherman Fuller, and, I imagine from what I heard, a millionaire in his own right. Decidedly an eligible! The way Mrs. Lorsson managed him was wonderful. There's no doubt that if she can throw Ruth at his head she'll do it. He seemed to be perfectly willing; but Ruth scarcely looked at him. When she did, it was with scorn. It was easy enough to see how the land lay. She was in love with some one else.

"Well, I had used my eyes pretty well when I was up in her room, and had noticed several things. Among these were, first, a Bible on her book-shelf, a half-filled box of caramels, a copy of *The Star* with one page torn out, and so on. I tried what the spiritualistic mediums call a 'fishing test' on her, saying that I thought she was very religious. She smiled rather cynically; but her stepmother thought it was wonderful. 'Why, Ruth goes up to her room every night after dinner to read her Bible!' she exclaimed. I next informed her that she was fond of sweet things, and her stepmother corroborated me by saying that she bought a box of candy every day or two.

"The rest was easy, and doesn't matter. But I could see that she was strictly chaperoned. She didn't go out of the room without Mrs. Lorsson's asking her where she was going, and from the conversation I inferred that she went nowhere alone. I was certain it was not only mere conventionality. Mrs. Lorsson watches her. As I was going out, a maid brought some letters in on a salver. One was for Miss Ruth. Mrs. Lorsson opened it calmly, as if it were for herself, glanced it over, and handed it to her stepdaughter. I have no doubt that the letters Miss Ruth writes are inspected as well."

"Isn't it awful?" sighed Valeska. "I thought that sort of thing had all gone by nowadays."

"Not when you have a stepdaughter, and an eligible young millionaire to marry her to," said Astro. "That woman is a tyrant and a schemer. There's little love lost in that family, I'm sure. But now look at the cipher again."

"First, let me think," Valeska said thoughtfully, holding the paper in her hand. "Here's a young girl who is having a young man, whom she doesn't like, forced on her. She is probably in love with another; but is not allowed to see him or to write to him. Well, *I'd* manage to communicate with him in some way."

"Yes, and you're clever, for eighteen, and you read the Bible every night after dinner."

"Oh!" Valeska's eyes grew bright. "Then these figures refer to Bible texts? But that was the way our grandmothers wrote, interlarding their messages with

Scriptural quotations. I don't really believe Ruth is so religious as that."

"Ah, you don't know your Bible then," Astro rejoined, as he went to a bookcase and took down a copy. "Why, it's the most wonderful book in the world in more ways than one! It not only contains the sum of human and divine wisdom, but almost every message that one might wish to send. Why, it's a ready-made lover's codex! It isn't only the Song of Songs that contains beautiful love messages, I assure you. They're scattered all through the book."

"Then these figures must refer to the chapters and verses," Valeska said, scrutinizing the numbers.

"And the books," Astro added.

Valeska still puzzled over the list of figures. "The numbers seem too high for that."

"And there's our first clue. Now let us examine the columns in detail. We'd naturally expect the number of the book to come first, the chapter next, and the verse last. The highest number in the first row is seventy-one. But there are only sixty-six books in the Bible; so that can't be the number of any book. Taking the second column, we see that the highest number is three hundred forty-one. But the longest book in the Bible, the book of Psalms, has only one hundred and fifty chapters, so that column can't give the chapter numbers—as it is, at least. The third column has only the number ninety-one. That can't be the number of every verse."

He waited for Valeska. She frowned prettily as she studied it out. For some time her look was intense, rapt. Then, as if some idea passed from him to her, her smile came radiantly, and she exclaimed:

"The figures are reversed! What a sly-boots she is!"

Astro smiled also. "Of course I saw that at the first glance. There is a direct corroboration of it plainly evident. In the first place, ninety-one reversed is nineteen, the number in Biblical order of the book of Psalms, which has more personal messages than any other book and second we get the chapter one hundred forty-three, which could come from no other book, of course. Now let us try and see what we get. I'll begin at the top, the sixty-third Psalm, verses three, four, and five." And he read aloud:

> "'Because thy loving kindness is better than life, my lips shall praise thee.
>
> "'Thus will I bless thee while I live: I will lift up my hands in thy name.
>
> "'My soul shall be satisfied as with marrow and fatness; and my mouth shall praise thee with joyful lips.'"

"It's pretty, isn't it?" he asked.

The tears had come into Valeska's eyes. "Oh, it's beautiful!" she exclaimed. "No one could call it sacrilegious, even though she has used the words that apply to the Almighty for her own lover. She's a dear! It seems wrong to pry into so charming a secret; but I'm dying to hear the rest of it."

Astro put down the cipher. "This is evidently only one side of the correspondence, you must remember. If we are to get it all, we must find his answers. That's a little more difficult."

"It seems impossible to me," said Valeska. "You only happened on this. I shouldn't know where to look for his messages."

He sat down and looked at her seriously. "The only way is to use your imagination and your memory. Put yourself in her place. You can't trust servants or mails. You are watched everywhere except in your own room. Think it out; concentrate your mind on the problem."

Valeska dropped her head on her hand thoughtfully, and spoke as if to herself. "Let's see. I am in my room alone. I read my Bible and pick out appropriate messages. But how do I get them to him?" She looked up, puzzled.

"Never mind that now. How does he communicate with you?"

"There's a box of candy there, and a newspaper—" She paused and then, gazing at him through narrowed eyes, went on. "It must be through the paper; I can't see any other way possible. No one would suspect that, if the message were concealed. It might be in the 'Personal' column."

"That's too easy, and it might be noticed. Besides, *The Star* has no 'Personals'."

"Then— It couldn't be in a news item; for he wouldn't be sure of its being inserted, even if he were a reporter. It must be in an advertisement."

He went into the waiting-room, and returned with a copy of *The Star.*

"Correct," he said. "That's the only possible solution. Now the thing to do is to look through this file of *The Star* and see if we can discover any advertisement that seems suspicious. First, what date shall we look up?"

Valeska returned to the paper on which the numbers were written. "Well," she said, "if it were I, I should want to have a message as often as possible. If I send him my texts every night, he ought to reply in the morning paper. This paper seems to show four messages. The last one must be yesterday's. That would bring his first advertisement just four days ago —Monday, May twenty-fifth."

He turned to the file, and they looked over the pages together, her chin on his shoulder, Astro's long forefinger hovering at one advertisement after another, his suave voice keeping up a running commentary:

"We'll omit the displayed ads. He's probably poor, or Ruth's stepmother wouldn't object to him; so couldn't afford that, and besides they would be too conspicuous. All the little ones are classified under heads. Let's see: 'Automobiles,'—h'm, all well-known second-hand shops. 'Lawyers,'—nothing there. 'Real Estate, Villa Lots,'—don't see anything, do you? 'Furnished Rooms.' 'Unfurnished Flats,'—let's go carefully here. What we want is three figures. We'll recognize them by the wording, if they're put in on purpose. I don't see anything there. H'm, 'For Sale,' —go slow now! 'Fixtures.' 'Bargains.' 'Typewriters.' 'Sacrifice,'—well! what do you think of that? Eureka!"

His finger stopped at a three-line notice, which read:

> FOR SALE
>
> 19 vols. of *Sir Roger de Coverley,* 63 illustrations on wood; $6 and $8 each. G. P. James & Co., Flatiron Bldg.

"Now, isn't that crazy enough to be suspicious? 'Nineteen' again, too,—her favorite number. Who ever heard of Sir Roger de Coverley, except in the papers of *The Spectator,* anyway? There you are: 19:63—6 and 8. Look it up!"

Valeska flew to the Bible and turned to the Psalms, and read from the sixty-third chapter:

> "'When I remember thee upon my bed, and meditate on thee in the night watches.
>
> "'My soul followeth hard after thee: thy right hand upholdeth me.'"

"The blessed infants! Isn't it perfectly lovely? Ruth must have had hard work to answer that; but the one she sent was nearly as good, wasn't it? Oh, let's find the next one, and get the whole correspondence quick! It's too exciting!"

Astro opened the issue of the twenty-sixth, and scanned the advertisements carefully. It was some time before they found it, and several false clues were followed up. Valeska, thinking she had discovered the secret, would hurriedly take the Bible, only to be referred to some such text in Ezra as,—

> "'The children of Magbish, an hundred fifty and six.
>
> "'The children of Kirjath-arim, Chephirah, and Beeroth, seven hundred and forty and three,—'"

and would go off into peals of laughter. Some of these false scents led deep into the "Begats"; some led into the whale's belly.

But at last the right one was discovered in the "Second Hand" column, which read, innocently enough:

> FOR SALE: 64 good, 1st class, 2d hand tables. Address CHESTER, Star Office.

And, turning, therefore, to the third book of John, chapter one, verse two, she read aloud:

> "'Beloved, I wish above all things that thou mayest prosper and be in health, even as thy soul prospereth.'"

"Now let's arrange the whole correspondence as far as we have it," Valeska suggested, after the four messages were all deciphered. "It certainly is a charming set of love-letters!"

"It may well be, written by the ablest literary men of King James' epoch," said Astro. "You read off the texts, and I'll write them down. It's a relief from solving murder mysteries and dynamite outrages and stolen jewels."

Valeska, having the references checked off, read as follows, insisting that Ruth's lover should be called Chester, from the name in the second advertisement.

> *Ruth*
>
> "'I will love thee, O Lord, my strength. (Ps. 18:1.)
>
> "'Thou wilt shew me the path of life; in thy presence is fulness of joy; at thy right hand there are pleasures for evermore.'" (Ps. 16:11.)
>
> *Chester*
>
> "'And now I beseech thee, lady, not as though I wrote a new commandment unto thee, but that which we had from the beginning, that we love one another. (2 John, 5.)
>
> "'I stretch forth my hands unto thee: my soul thirsteth after thee, as a thirsty land. *Selah.*'" (Ps. 143:6.)

Ruth

"'I will behave myself wisely in a perfect way. O when wilt thou come unto me? I will walk within my house with a perfect heart. (Ps. 101:2.)

"'My covenant will I not break, nor alter the thing that is gone out of my lips.'" (Ps. 89:34.)

Chester

"'How sweet are thy words unto my taste! yea, sweeter than honey to my mouth! (Ps. 119:103.)

"'Whom have I in heaven but thee? and there is none upon earth that I desire beside thee.'" (Ps. 73:25.)

Ruth

"'Cause me to hear thy loving kindness in the morning; for in thee do I trust: cause me to know the way wherein I should walk; for I lift up my soul unto thee. (Ps. 143:8.)

"'And hide not thy face from thy servant; for I am in trouble; hear me speedily.'" (Ps. 69-17.)

Valeska reread the whole series, and her eyes burned deep. Astro watched her pretty serious face without a word, waiting for her comments. The tears glistened in her eyes as she said finally:

"Oh! can't we help them somehow? Surely you can, if you only will!"

Astro recited whimsically to himself:

"'They warned him of her,
And they warned her of him;
And the courtship proceeded
To go on with a vim!'"

"It's altogether too romantic for us to interfere with. Let them have their clandestine correspondence; it makes the affair interesting. Wait till we read his reply in to-morrow's *Star,* Valeska. Perhaps they can manage it themselves."

This was all she could get out of the Master of Mysteries that day; but she knew from his silent contemplation that he had not stopped thinking the matter over. She herself puzzled her wits as to how Ruth had communicated with her lover, until she had to give it up. She knew that if she waited Astro would solve that mystery, if indeed he had not already found it out.

She came into the studio next morning excitedly. "Oh! isn't it awful?" were her first words. She held the morning *Star* out to him, with an anxious look.

Astro smiled and pointed to another copy which lay on his great table where his astrological charts were spread out. "It's only a lover's quarrel, I think. He's a little jealous of that Sherman Fuller, I imagine."

"Well, that's enough. I should think Chester would be wild!"

"Well," said Astro, yawning, "I'm glad he made one jump out of the Psalms, anyway. I was getting tired of that number nineteen. Job is a good place for a jealous man to look. You'd better add his remarks to our list."

Valeska, therefore, wrote down the following texts, which she had drawn from the advertisement of that morning's paper:

Chester

"'I prevented the dawning of the morning, and cried: I hoped in thy word. (Ps. 119:147.)

"'Thou holdest mine eyes waking: I am so troubled that I can not speak. (Ps. 77:4.)

> "'Lover and friend hast thou put far from me, and mine acquaintance into darkness. (Ps. 18:18.)
>
> "'When I thought to know this, it was too painful for me. (Ps. 73:16.)
>
> "'Why doth thine heart carry thee away? and what do thine eyes wink at . . . ? (Job 15:12.)
>
> "'Deliver my soul from the sword; my darling from the power of the dog.'" (Ps. 22:20.)

"Surely you'll help them out *now,* won't you?" Valeska pleaded. "We can't let it all be spoiled this way! Think how hard it is for her to explain!"

"Trust *her,*" said Astro, shaking his head. "Only I'd like to know how she does it; that's all I want. I propose that we take a walk out to Fifty-third Street this evening. You know she goes up-stairs into her room every night after dinner, say from eight till nine o'clock. I think if we walk up and down in front of that block we may find something doing."

"Oh, I hope we'll find Chester, anyway!" Valeska exclaimed.

They proceeded as he had suggested, that evening, to walk up Fifth Avenue after dinner, reaching Fifty-third Street at a few minutes past eight. Astro pointed out Ruth's window, which was already lighted. Then together they walked slowly up and down on the opposite side of the street, keeping the house well in view.

They had not been there for more than ten minutes, when the sash was suddenly thrown up in Ruth Lorsson's room. They could see her form silhouetted against the light. A white something was thrown out, and fell on the sidewalk. Immediately a man emerged from the shadow of the adjacent doorway, ran down the steps, picked up the white package, and walked rapidly up the street.

"It's Chester!" Valeska exclaimed.

"Yes, we must find out where he lives and who he is," was Astro's reply. "You had better go home, and I'll follow him."

The man had walked off so rapidly that she saw it would be useless to attempt to keep up with him, much less overtake him, and she tried to stifle her disappointment as Astro, leaving her, walked quickly up the street. As Chester walked, she saw him tear something from the package he carried. Then another white piece dropped. She followed far enough to discover what the fragments were—the sides of an empty candy box which Ruth Lorsson had thrown into the street. Her message had indubitably been written on the bottom, since he had thrown all the rest away.

"I see now why Miss Ruth is so fond of candy," Valeska said to herself. "A note thrown from the window would be too dangerous and too hard to find. It's ridiculously simple! I think I'm growing fond of that girl."

Next day Astro appeared at the studio with the information that the young man's name was indeed Chester; that he was an artist or illustrator for magazines; and that he lived on the south side of Washington Square.

"He's getting into a terrible state," said Valeska. "Did you read his advertisement this morning? It was under 'Lawyers' this time."

"I haven't had time to look over *The Star*. What is it?"

Valeska read from her list the last addition:

> "'For thou hast made him most blessed forever; thou hast made him exceeding glad with thy countenance. (Ps. 21:6.)
>
> "'Thou hast given him his heart's desire, and hast not withholden the request of his lips. *Selah.* (Ps. 21:2.)
>
> "'Yea, they opened their mouth wide against me, and said, Aha, aha, our eye hath seen it. (Ps. 35:21.)
>
> "'I am troubled; I am bowed down greatly; I go mourning all the day long.'" (Ps. 38:6.)

"Poor devil!" Astro grew serious. "I did see a paragraph in *Town Gossip* this morning about a Fifty-third Street belle who was about to make a brilliant match. It was thinly disguised, and evidently referred to Ruth Lorsson."

"He evidently believes she is engaged," said Valeska; "but I don't. No girl would give up such a romantic lover."

"Now," said Astro, "the question is: How are we going to get hold of her side of the correspondence? I'm getting as interested in this affair as if I were paid for it. The fact that there is a misunderstanding does alter the matter too, and I don't see but that we'll have to straighten it out if we can. I've thought of a way to get hold of to-night's message by a trick. It may work, and it may not. Of course it's rather low of us to interfere with their private post-office; but we may be able to make that up to them later. Anyway, it will make it exciting for them. I'm going to bait a box myself," he went on, "and place it on the sidewalk at a quarter of eight. Chester will arrive and think that for some reason she has already thrown it out, and he'll take it and make off. Then, when she throws her own box out, we'll grab it."

The temptation was too great for Valeska's curiosity, and she gave a hesitating consent, on the agreement that it should be tried only once. "But you'll have to put a message on the box, or he'll know there's something wrong," she said.

"Turn to Psalms 102. I think that will not compromise her too much," Astro said.

> "'My heart is smitten. and withered like grass; so that I forget to eat my bread. (Ps. 102: 4.)
>
> "'Because of thine indignation and thy wrath: for thou hast lifted me up, and cast me down.'" (Ps. 102:10.)

The ruse succeeded. Shortly after eight o'clock, Chester came walking down the street, spied the box which Astro had placed conspicuously on the sidewalk, examined it quickly, and walked hurriedly away. Fifteen minutes later, Ruth's box dropped from the window. Astro secured it and took it to a near-by lamp post, looked at the figures, and then consulted a small Bible which he drew from his pocket.

"This is too bad," he said to Valeska, who had accompanied him. "I didn't think she'd be so strong. It won't do for him to miss this message, poor chap! Here, read it:"

> "'Deliver me not over unto the the will of mine enemies: for false witnesses are risen up against me, and such as breathe out cruelty. (Ps. 27:12.)
>
> "'I have not sat with vain persons, neither will I go in with dissemblers. (Ps. 26:4.)
>
> "'But as for me, I will walk in mine integrity: redeem me, and be merciful unto me.'" (Ps. 26: 11.)

"I'll tell you what'll do," said Astro, "we'll send this down to his house by a messenger boy. He won't know what to make of it; but he won't be able to ask her how it was delivered till it's all over."

The message was sent at once; then, as Astro walked with Valeska to her home, he said:

"We can't do this again; it will make too much trouble. You'll have to see if you can't get into his studio some way and find out what messages he is receiving. You can go and offer yourself as a model. That will give you plenty of time to look about, and you may manage to find the bottoms of the boxes every day. If I know the young man in love, he won't destroy them."

Valeska consented to attempt the adventure, and accordingly set out the next morning after entering on her list the following message deciphered from Chester's advertisement in *The Star*:

> "'Let the lying lips be put to silence; which speak grievous things proudly and contemptuously against the righteous. (Ps. 31:18.)
>
> "'For I said in my haste, I am cut off from before thine eyes: nevertheless thou heardest the voice of my supplications when I cried unto thee. (Ps. 31:22.)

"'In the day when I cried thou answeredst me, and strengthenedst me with strength in my soul. (Ps. 138:3.)

"'So foolish was I, and ignorant: I was as a beast before thee.'" (Ps. 73:22.)

Astro worked all day in his studio alone, reading palms and casting horoscopes for his fashionable clients, and during the leisure times between their calls, casting many a glance across to the desk where his pretty blond assistant was wont to look up at him with such animation whenever he spoke. The velvet hangings were dull and shadowy, and the high lights on trophies of arms and tinseled costumes on the wall twinkled through the dusk, when the portières parted, and Valeska, smartly attired, gloved and feathered, appeared. Astro smiled for almost the first time that day. She sank into a deep divan to get her breath. He turned on a light above her head.

"He's a perfect dear!" she said as soon as she could speak. "He isn't at all handsome, in fact he's ugly; but he's the most romantic and kind-hearted chap in the world. I'd trust him anywhere. He has red hair, and twinkling blue eyes, and fine teeth, and so young —why he made me feel eighty years old! It was too easy! I was just what he wanted, and I was intelligent, and he liked my hands." She extended them gracefully for Astro to admire. He kissed her finger-tips.

"It was a funny old place, all full of canvases with their faces to the wall, and dust, and pewter pots, and brushes, and old magazines, and everything. It smelled horribly of tobacco and turpentine; but it was such fun! I didn't have to do much detective work, either.

Do you know, the child actually had all those candy-box bottoms nailed in a row on the wall over the mantel-piece! I felt like a thief. There they were, all of them you got the list of, and the one we sent last night, and there was a shabby Bible on his mantel-piece."

"How did he treat you?"

Valeska laughed. "Well, not in a way to make me conceited. Oh, he's in love, all right. He looked at me exactly as if he were purchasing a horse. I almost expected him to open my mouth and examine my teeth to see how old I was. But he was nice, all the same, and delighted to find a model that had brains and could take and hold a pose. My, if I'm not tired, though! I was supposed to be playing on a piano—the table—and looking up mischievously over my shoulder. I ache all over!"

"Of course he didn't say anything significant?"

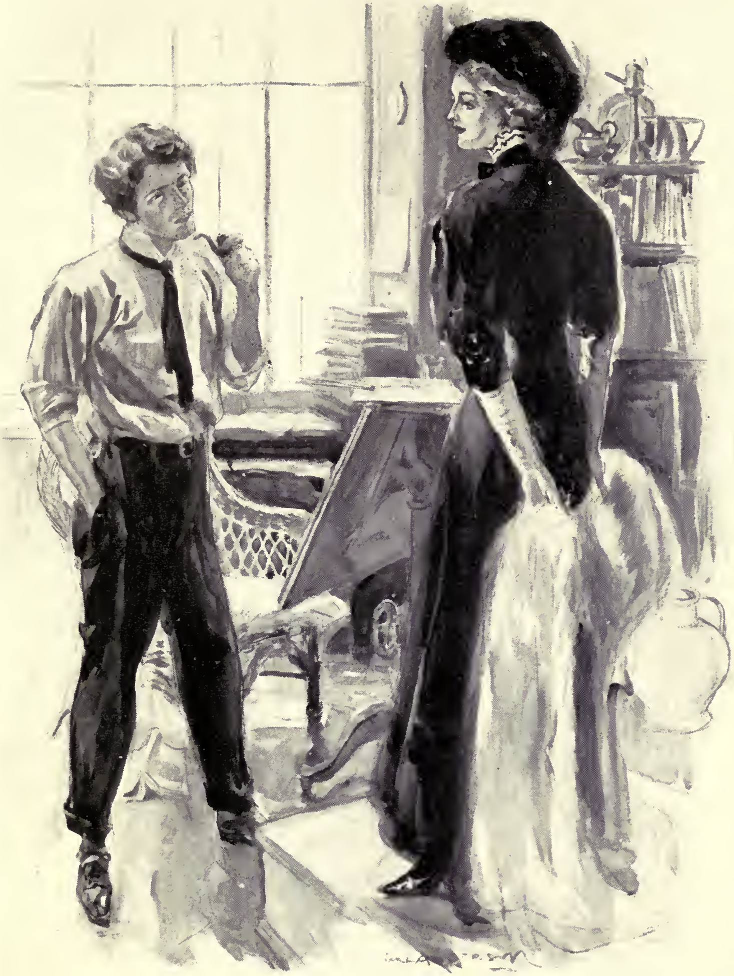
"No. But he stopped working every little while and began to think; and I knew what *that* meant. Then he'd go to the window and look out for a long while, and then come back and draw like mad. Oh, he had all the signs! Poor boy!"

"Does he want you to-morrow?"

"Yes, all this week."

"Good! By that time I think we shall have arranged some plan to help him. If I bought a picture or two, it might help, perhaps."

Valeska posed for Chester the six days, returning each evening to the studio to report to Astro, each time more interested in the love-affair. Each day she wrote down the cipher message printed in *The Star*, and the text she found in the studio written on Ruth's



"He looked at me as if he were purchasing a horse."

candy box. At the end of the week the courtship began to approach a crisis, as the correspondence showed.

Ruth

"'He that worketh deceit shall not dwell within my house; he that telleth lies shall not tarry in my sight. (Ps. 101:7.)

"'But thou art the same, and thy years shall have no end.'" (Ps. 102:27.)

Chester

"'I will instruct thee and teach thee in the way which thou shalt go: I will guide thee with mine eye.'" (Ps. 32:8.)

Ruth

"'And I will delight myself in thy commandments, which I have loved. (Ps. 119:47.)

"'But mine enemies are lively, and they are strong: and they that hate me wrongfully are multiplied. Ps. 38:19.)

"'All that hate me whisper together against me: against me do they devise my hurt.'" (Ps. 41:7.)

Chester

"'Let not them that are mine enemies wrongfully rejoice over me: neither let them wink with the eye that hate me without a cause. (Ps. 35:19.)

"'Let them be turned back for a reward of their shame that say, Aha, aha.'" (Ps. 70:3.)

Ruth

"'Pull me out of the net that they have laid privily for me: for thou art my strength. (Ps. 31:4.)

"'Then call thou, and I will answer: or let me speak and answer thou me.'" (Job 13:22.)

Chester

"'Having many things to write unto you, I would not write with paper and ink: but I trust to come unto you, and speak face to face, that our joy may be full.'" (2 John:12.)

Ruth

"'They gather themselves together, they hide themselves, they mark my steps, when they wait for my soul. (Ps. 56:6.)

"'And I said, Oh that I had wings like a dove! for then I would fly away, and be at rest. (Ps. 55:6.)

"'I would hasten my escape from the windy storm and tempest. (Ps. 55:8.)

"'That thy beloved may be delivered; save with thy right hand, and hear me.'" (Ps. 60:5.)

Chester

"'And it shall be, if thou go with us, yea, it shall be, that what goodness the Lord shall do unto us, the same will we do unto thee.'" (Num. 10:32.)

Ruth

"'Then said I, Lo, I come: in the volume of the book it is written of me. (Ps. 40:7.)

"'And Ruth said, Intreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God.'" (Ruth 1:16.)

"It *is* getting serious, isn't it?" said Valeska, when she brought the last message of Ruth's. "Poor Chester is half crazy. He's been working like mad to get some illustrations for *The Universal Magazine* done; so as to get money enough to get married on, I suppose. But how in the world they are going to elope, I don't see."

"Love laughs at locksmiths," said Astro.

"But not at stepmothers. All the same, they're going to do it somehow, and I want to see the fun. It's bound to come off in a day or so now. I'm dying to speak of it to Chester and offer to help him; but I'm afraid it would spoil his fun. Hadn't we better just play about on the edge of it, and be ready for anything that happens?"

"It all depends on the next message. You go to the studio to-morrow and see if you can't find out about the elopement."

"All right," said Valeska.

At ten o'clock the next morning Astro received by a messenger a hurriedly penciled note. It read:

> "Something awful has happened! Chester broke his leg last night, and was taken to the hospital; but when it was set (the leg), he insisted on being brought home to the studio. He's almost crazy, and has a fever, and I'm sure the elopement was planned for to-night. I'll get it out of him somehow, and you must tell me what to do. Here's the text he got last night: I can't make it out; so please tell me immediately. V."

The text indicated was from the fifty-ninth Psalm, verse fourteen:

> "'And at evening let them return; and let them make a noise like a dog, and go round about the city.'"

As soon as Astro had looked it up, he put on his hat and coat, and jumping into his green limousine drove to Washington Square.

It was half past eight when Ruth Lorsson raised the shade of her window and threw up the sash. It was raining, and the asphalt pavement shimmered with reflected lights. At the curb opposite her house a taxicab was waiting. She looked at it eagerly.

There came a sudden noise like the barking of a dog repeated three times. Ruth smiled, let down the sash, and drew the shade. Then, stuffing a package wrapped in a towel inside her full blouse, she ran down-stairs.

"Ruth, child! what are you doing?" Mrs. Lorsson's voice came petulantly.

Ruth hovered a moment by the doorway, to say, in a voice that trembled a little, "Oh, I only want to get the Smiths' address from one of their cards on the hall table."

She walked swiftly to the front door, opened it noiselessly, slipped out, and shut it carefully behind her. She had to slam it to make it latch, and the jar frightened her. She fairly flew down the steps now, and ran across the street straight for the cab. The door in its side swung open, and she popped inside. The cab instantly drove off at a furious pace.

There was a dark figure inside. She snuggled up to it deliciously. "Oh, Harry!" she breathed. "At last! Oh, I thought this time never would come!" Then with a little scream she jumped away from him. "Who *are* you!" she demanded. Her voice rang with terror.

"My dear," said Astro, "don't be frightened. Mr. Chester couldn't come. He has had a slight accident; but not bad enough to prevent his being married to-night. I'm going to have the pleasure of giving you away. I have your bridesmaid all ready at the studio."

"Why, how did you know?" she demanded, staring at him. Then, as an electric light suddenly illuminated the interior of the cab, she recognized the fine picturesque features of the Master of Mysteries, and gave a little sigh of relief. "Oh, it's Astro!" she exclaimed. "You know everything, don't you? Did you see it in your crystal ball?"

He smiled as he replied, "My dear, I saw it in your pretty eyes the first time I saw you."

"But tell me about Harry! Oh, I am so frightened! It must be a bad accident to keep him away—to-night."

He reassured her, and they drove on she, excited, eager with anticipation, fearful of the step she had taken, but more and more confident in Astro's protection. They reached Washington Square, and hurried to the studio. Valeska met them at the door with a smile. For a moment Ruth eyed her suspiciously.

"Your bridesmaid," said Astro.

Ruth, relieved, but anxious for a sight of her lover, darted by with hardly a glance, and ran to the bed where Harry Chester lay, weak, but impatiently awaiting her.

"Oh, Harry!"

"Oh, Ruth!"

Astro and Valeska walked into the hall. "Well," said Astro, "I hope she's satisfied now. She has lost four millions and three magnificent houses, not to speak of a permanent place in smart society."

"For which she'd have to pay all her life," said Valeska. "If you ask me, I'd say she's got a bargain. Come, let's call in the minister! I'm going to wait and see it out!"

THE CALENDON KIDNAPING CASE

HARDLY had Astro's office hours begun, one morning, when Valeska threw back the black velvet portières of the great studio, and motioned her visitors to enter. They came in anxiously—a dignified but careworn haggard man of fifty and his hysterical sobbing wife. Apparently they expected immediately to meet the Master of Mysteries face to face; for they looked curiously about the richly decorated apartment with a hesitating air.

"You'll have to wait a few moments," said the girl in a friendly voice. "The Master is at present rapt in a psychic trance, and can not be disturbed. Excuse me while I prepare for his awakening. It is dangerous to call him too suddenly; but I know your business is urgent, and I'll do what I can."

With that, she took from a small antique reliquary a handful of green powder and scattered it on a censer. Almost immediately it flared up and sent forth an aromatic smoke. It flickered eerily as she left them. Once alone, she entered a small chamber off the reception-room, and turned on the studio lights from an electric switch.

In the place where she stood now, looking into a large mirror, she could see the visitors, vividly illuminated, as if in a camera obscura. The man sat listlessly staring straight ahead of him without movement of any kind. The woman gazed, with raised eyebrows and a half-startled expression, from one curious object to another. The skull in a corner made her tremble. Her fingers plucked nervously at her wrap. It was evident that she was fearfully distraught.

Astro entered the cabinet and cast his eyes on the glass. His assistant leaned close to him and whispered:

"A kidnaping case. The Calendons' little boy was stolen a week or so ago, don't you remember? It's really dreadful. The police have been unable to locate the child anywhere, and the parents are half crazy about it. She poured it all out to me while they were waiting for you. I do hope you can do something!"

The Seer's eyes were busy in the mirror. "Yes, I know. He's a director in the tobacco trust. I'd have known it, anyway, by that little gold cigar on his watch-charm. A dozen of them were made for souvenirs when the combine was first organized. He hasn't slept for two or three nights. But what's he doing with *The Era?* He'd naturally be a reader of *The Planet*. Oh, I see! The kidnapers, of course, have asked him to communicate with them through the 'Personal' column. So they've begun to work him already. Poor devil!"

It was an agonizing story that fell from the lips of Calendon a little later; one which, in all the sensational events of the Seer's career in the solution of mysteries, long stood out as unique. Used as was

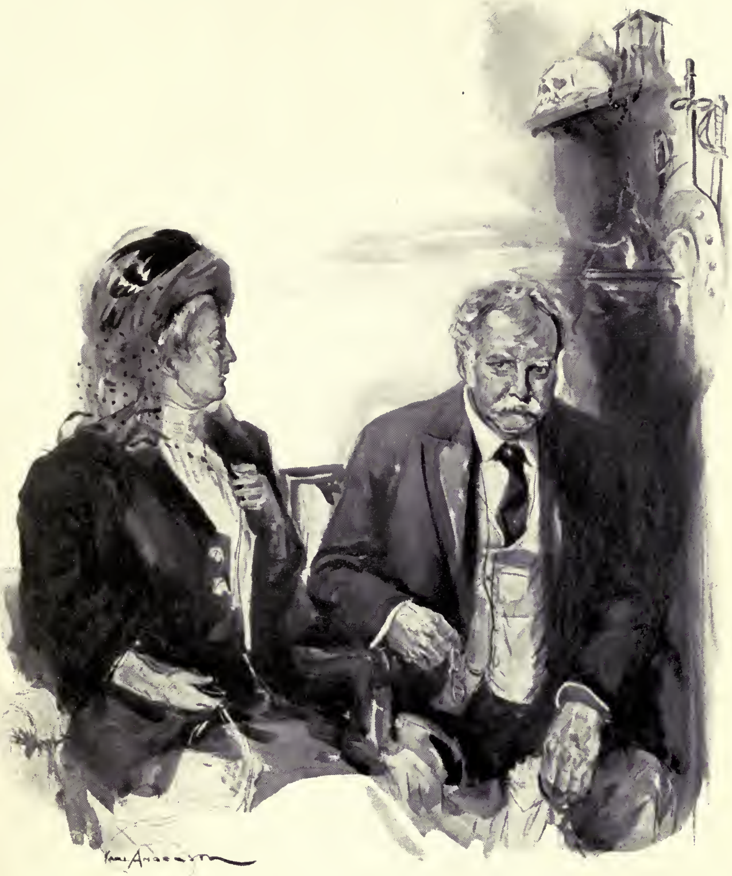
Astro to astonishing recitals, there was a ferocity about this crime that astonished him. Calendon recited the details in a voice as hard and strained as a taut wire.

"My five-year-old boy, Harold, has been missing for ten days, having been kidnaped and kept in hiding by the most merciless gang of fiends in New York. I try to restrain myself, sir, in order to tell you the story concisely; but I assure you that it is hard to speak calmly. My child was abducted in Central Park, where he had gone with his nurse. He had strayed a little away from her at the time. I can not think the crime was committed with her connivance. Nevertheless, she has been closely watched. I have not spared money, I assure you. I at once notified the police, and they have been at work on the case, without results, so far." He paused for a moment, almost overcome.

His wife interrupted him with a cry of anguish pitiful to hear. "Oh, James! how can you sit there and tell all that? Why don't you tell him immediately what has happened to-day? Why don't you show him the terrible thing?" She dropped her face in her hands and sobbed aloud. Valeska, deeply moved herself, tried in vain to comfort her.

Calendon put a trembling hand into his pocket and drew out a package wrapped in paper. Silently he handed it to the palmist. Astro took it and carefully undid the wrapping.

Inside was disclosed a small tin box, such as tobacco of the sliced-plug variety usually comes in. This, opened, showed an object in crumpled oiled paper, packed in the box with cotton-wool. Astro, with a grave expression on his face, picked the thing up and



"Why don't you show him the terrible thing?"

looked carefully at it. With great caution, then he slowly unfolded the paper. It was a child's toe.

For a few minutes not a sound was heard in the studio, save Mrs. Calendon's choking sobs, and the intake of her husband's deep breaths as he endeavored to master his emotion. Astro put aside the gruesome object with its wrappings, and then extended his hand and grasped Calendon's with a strong encouraging pressure.

"Mr. Calendon," he said simply, "I am at your service. I thank God that I have had some success in tracking down worse crimes than this, and what I can do in this matter shall be done without reward. Cheer up, Mr. Calendon; I can help you! Madam, pray accept my sympathy; but master yourself, for I must hear the whole story."

Calendon moistened his lips, pulled himself together, and looked gratefully at the slender poetic figure before him. "I'll tell you the rest of the story now, and I pray to God that you can help!" He turned to his wife, and after she was calmer he proceeded.

"It's devilishly ingenious, sir. What they are holding the boy for is in order to get tips on the market. That's their price. I got from them the third day a typewritten, unsigned letter telling me that if I valued the life of my boy, I should give them inside information of the stock market. They furnished me with a cipher,—an easy one that simply reads backward, and by means of it I communicate with them every morning in the personal column of *The Era*. I am not a stock gambler, sir, although I have a fair knowledge of current Wall Street probabilities, and I soon exhausted what information I had, and it became harder and harder to deliver the goods. You know how these things go: a big deal isn't pulled off every day, and, not being on the inside, I had to get down on my knees to beg for news from the men on the Street who were able to help me. A few have interested themselves in my misfortune and assisted me; but they're a cold-blooded set as a rule. But for a week I kept these bloodsuckers posted as well as I could, and I had good luck with my predictions. They must have made thousands; but still they wouldn't give up the boy. Why should they? They have a good thing, and intend to work it for all it's worth.

"But yesterday—great God!—yesterday I advertised in good faith to buy Continental Zinc. It was selling at 31, and I had figured on a big dividend being declared—so my advice had it—but instead the directors voted to pass it, and the stock fell six points. It rallied later, on the mine reports; but the rise came too late."

He stopped to draw a typewritten slip from his pocket. "Here's what came in the box," he said brokenly, and hid his face in his hands. Mrs. Calendon began weeping afresh.

Astro took the note and read it:

> "This is what we'll do every time you fool us. Be sharp!"

For some time Astro gazed at the sheet of paper, then rose and put it away with the other relics. "Have you the other letter here?"

Calendon took an envelope from his inside pocket and handed it to the palmist.

Astro held the envelope to the light, smelled of it, looked at the flap for a minute with his lens, then placed it on a side table. At last he rose and walked quietly over to a cupboard, from which he took a large crystal ball. This he placed on a black velvet cushion. He gazed into the sphere long and earnestly. It was his way of gaining time for reflection.

The Seer finally drew his long slim hand across his forehead and nodded his head. "There is no one you suspect? No woman?" he asked deliberately.

Calendon shook his head in silence.

"My nurse girl has been completely prostrated by the shock," Mrs. Calendon volunteered. "We are both sure she is innocent."

"There is a woman concerned in this, nevertheless. Now tell me what the police have done. They have tried to trace the buyers of the stocks you tipped off, I presume?"

"Certainly. We have tried to find what persons, if any, have profited by all the tips; but have been unsuccessful. I shall have a list, to-night probably, of all the buyers of Continental Zinc, eliminating, of course, the names of those who have bought for investment. The criminals are undoubtedly speculating on a margin, so there's little use looking up the records of the transfer office."

"You have your tip for to-morrow all ready for the newspaper?"

"Yes, and this time I'm sure it's safe."

"Very well, then, proceed as usual. You have, I suppose, your own detectives working on the case?"

"Yes. Can they do anything for you?"

"I'll telephone you early in the morning," said Astro, rising. "To-night I shall be busy. I shall cast the child's horoscope, and find out the best path to pursue. Kindly give me the exact hour of Harold's birth."

He wrote it down solemnly, then pressed an electric bell. Valeska appeared in the doorway; the visitors followed her into the waiting-room to the outer door.

Before she left, Mrs. Calendon took the girl's hand. "Oh, he's a wonderful man!" she exclaimed. "Somehow I have great faith in him. I'm strengthened already. He seems to know everything. Such eyes!"

Her husband shook his head skeptically and went out without a word.

Astro, meanwhile, had turned eagerly to the things that had been brought him, the lines of his olive face set and determined. From the inspired mystic to the man of practical analytic mind, the transition had been instantaneous. All pose was now dropped. His inspection was so absorbing that he did not notice Valeska's entrance. She did not speak, therefore, and watched him as he pored over the envelope, then at the oiled-paper wrapping of the horrid relic. Half an hour went by, during which the palmist rose several times to pace up and down the length of the dim studio. Once he took down a book from his shelves and ran hurriedly through its pages, stopping to mark a diagram. Valeska tiptoed across, and looked at the volume. It was Galton's *Finger Prints,* a classification of all the known capillary markings of the digital tips. It was an hour before Astro put up his work, much of which time had been spent merely in sitting with half-closed eyes, inert. Then he rose and yawned.

"Well, little girl, a bit of supper wouldn't go bad, would it?" he said gaily. "Afterward, you may sit at my feet, and I shall tell you of my desire to meet a lady that takes snuff, whose left thumb shows an invaded loop with two eyeleted rods; also, of my interest in a gentleman that rolls his own smokes on a *Moule à Cigarettes* and gambles in Continental Zinc."

Valeska shook her head, puzzled.

"You heard what Calendon said, of course?"

"Yes, I was in the cabinet all the time. But of course I haven't studied your evidence yet."

"Nor shall you this night, by Rameses! A crystal-gazer has to make his living on the curiosity of women. Kindly let me enjoy your curiosity this evening; and, that you may not be a loser, I shall explain to you the fallacies in Doctor Lasker's analysis of the Ruy Lopez opening. Meanwhile, let us try some of that new Assyrian jelly which I sent for so long ago. If you wish to add anything more substantial, I won't object, although I am a vegetarian, a Mahatma, an astrologer, a cabalist, a student of Higher Space, and a thorough believer in the doctrine that an ounce of mystery is worth a pound of commonplace. *Selah.* I have spoken."

During the meal, no one would have supposed by his animation that the occult Seer was confronted by the most difficult problem his profession had ever set before him. He joked like a young boy. His pretty assistant was kept in rippling peals of laughter. After dinner he produced a chess-board with ivory men, and the girl puzzled with him over innumerable variations of his favorite opening. They followed this by some of the regular chess problems, ending with several of his own. The last, finally, being too difficult, he left unfinished, sent Valeska home in his motor-car, and himself went to bed.

The next morning Astro looked, the first thing, at *The Era* personals. Calendon's advertisement read as follows:

ERUS: '97 Otog Lliwcirt celen atil opom S. O. C.

"I think," he said thoughtfully, "that it will hardly be dishonorable for me to plunge in Cosmopolitan Electric, so long as I'm not going to let Mr. Calendon pay me for this affair. Let's see. Sold yesterday at 75. If I can get it at five points margin, an investment of one thousand dollars will bring me in about eight hundred. I'll be able to get that Coptic manuscript I have been wanting so long. Now for Mr. Calendon!"

He took his telephone, and was soon in communication with his client. "What have you found out?" he asked.

"Twelve persons bought Continental Zinc," was the answer. "Of these, seven were legitimate investors. I have the names of the other five."

"Very good. Send your chief of detectives up to me in a hurry. There are some investigations they can make while I'm at work on a more important aspect of the case."

"Have you found out anything?" came the anxious inquiry.

"I am on the track. Have courage, and follow instructions. Tell Mrs. Calendon that she will not be disappointed in my work."

After Astro's routine work that day, Valeska came into the studio, unable any longer to control her curiosity.

Astro drew out the evidence in the case and spread it before her. "All life is made up of trivial actions," he began. "Every one of them leaves its little trace. Whether you are tracking a bear by its footprints through the forest, or a criminal through his nefarious deeds, it is the same thing. Both leave their spoor behind. Now examine this letter and envelope carefully."

Valeska took the magnifying-glass and scrutinized both; but was forced to acknowledge her defeat.

Astro took the envelope from her and tilted it to the light. "Do you see a slight mark there?" he asked. "It is the print of a thumb. It is not generally known that a finger pressed on paper will leave an invisible oily impression, especially when the hand has recently been passed through the hair. So it will on glass or any polished surface. Let us develop this print. The ink will cling to the paper except where these oily lines have been in contact with it. An ordinary thumb print would show the lines of the ridges; this will show those of the channels between the ridges."

Dipping a large brush in ink, he swept it lightly over the paper. The ink flowed away from a patch where a little system of concentric lines appeared.

"Lo! the invaded loop!" he announced. "It is a woman's thumb. I saw it yesterday, and copied its fundamental diagram and its core. Now look at the mucilage on the flap. Do you see those tiny grains? Snuff, as I proved by my microscope. The postage-stamp is awry, and half off, and also shows tiny traces of snuff. The woman was in a hurry. The corners of her mouth were stained with the result of her filthy practise. Now for the paper surrounding the toe. Let me smooth it out. Do you see the foldings and indentations that were there before it was used for this purpose? The marks are unmistakable, and by their geometric extension, to any one who has studied stereotomy and the development of surfaces, it shows unmistakably what that object was. See,—the parallel lines, a twisted rumpled area, and here the traces of the milling of a small wheel. A small cigarette machine, such as one buys on the Rue de la Paix, in Paris. This is a long shot, to be sure, but sometimes it is the long shot that brings down the eagle. If I hit the mark this time, I shall never be afraid of making a risky guess again. We shall see."

He was interrupted by the bell. Valeska left him, to introduce a neat and dapper young man, who entered, with a self-satisfied smile, with the report from the detective offices of Nally & Co.

The five purchasers of Continental Zinc bought from the curb market had been traced with some difficulty. A man had been assigned to each buyer, and these had followed the instructions given Nally that morning.

Abraham Kraser, retired Jewish merchant; the purchaser of twenty shares; smoked thick black cigars.

H. V. Linwood, a young club-man and society favorite; insisted on a special brand of Russian cigarettes, costing four dollars a hundred.

William Bartlett Smith, a Westerner staying at the Waldorf-Astoria; smoked a French brier pipe with granulated tobacco.

Lambert F. Owens, a race-track bookie, living in South Orange, New Jersey; could not be traced, but information in regard to him was momentarily expected.

"The fifth man, Paul Stacey, I saw myself," said the detective. "I acted as a newspaper reporter. He's fairly well-known on the Street; but yet I could find out little about him. Nobody knew much; but what they did let out was not very favorable. But I talked to him, and he smokes incessantly. Rolls his own cigarettes with a little nickel-plated machine. Keeps Turkish tobacco loose in his right-hand coat pocket, the instrument in his left. While I was near him he threw away a stub, and I brought it to show you. Here it is."

"Very good," said Astro, squinting at the cigarette butt. "You needn't bother about Owens. Now I want you to shadow this man Stacey wherever he goes. Use as many men for relays as you think necessary; but don't let him give you the slip, as you value your reputation. You understand the importance of this, and how fast we must work if the boy is to be saved."

As the young man left, Astro picked up the evening paper and turned to the reports of the stock market. His eyes ran down the column of figures swiftly, until he came to the line:

2000 Cosmopolitan Electric........ 75 70 72 -3

"Rameses the Great!" he ejaculated. "That will teach me a lesson not to take advantage of my inside information. My margin's wiped out already. Pity I didn't stay with my good intentions! And I an Astrologer of the Fourth Circle! I hope nobody will find that out. Valeska, whatever you do, don't gamble." For a moment he stood contemplating the sheet before him, and then he turned to her with a strange expression.

"Mercy!" he cried, "I forgot. Calendon's tip has gone wrong again! What will happen next? It's horrible!"

He was interrupted by a long ring at the electric bell, and, when Valeska answered it, Calendon plunged into the room, holding a package in one hand. The muscles of his hand were twitching in a frenzy of agony.

"It's come again, oh God!" he cried. "My poor boy! What in heaven's name can we do?" He went up to the palmist fiercely. "See here! you promised me your help! You even gave me encouragement! See what has happened already! How long must this thing go on?"

"Have you opened the package?" Astro asked quietly.

Calendon shuddered. "No. I couldn't!"

"Leave it with me, then. You must wait, Mr. Calendon. I am hard at work. I am certain to succeed. Already I have the man; but it is necessary to prove it. One can't use a crystal vision as evidence in a court of law, you know."

"Who is the scoundrel?" Calendon demanded. "By heaven! I'll tear him limb from limb! I'll kill him! I'll—"

Astro put a restraining hand on the director's arm. "Calm yourself, Mr. Calendon," he said soothingly. "It is not by such means that we'll get the boy. In your present frame of mind I dare not trust you with the man's name. If you make a move now, you may jeopardize your boy's life. He must on no account know that he is suspected. No, play the game, Mr. Calendon, according to the rules the kidnapers have prescribed, and I'll guarantee that soon they'll be playing it according to your own ideas of justice. Get your tip and advertise as usual. You will no doubt have better luck to-morrow."

"To-morrow," said Calendon sadly, "I'm going to throw all my holdings in the Fountainet Company into the market and bear the stock long enough for these devils to get their shameful profits. I can't bear to receive another package. It will mean ruin for me; but I'll not care, if the boy is safe."

It was fortunate for Astro that at that time he was also interested in the astonishing burglaries at Glebe House; for it filled in a tedious forty-eight hours of waiting with considerable excitement. Valeska could see that the Master was profoundly interested in the fate of the young boy, and that it had enlisted all his deepest sympathies. What little leisure they had was occupied with a set of chess problems which Astro was working out for relaxation.

It was a great relief, therefore, when the young detective from Nally's put in his appearance two days later, and made his report.

"We've been hot on Stacey's trail ever since I left you; but with nothing doing of any importance whatever until late yesterday afternoon. Then he took a train to Antwerp, New Jersey. He was met at the station by a carryall containing two women. He rode about for an hour with them, not stopping anywhere at all, and was driven back to the station, and took the six-twelve back to New York, and went direct to his rooms at the Beau Rivage apartments."

"He saw no one else? Not even a man in black, with a black tie?"

"Absolutely no one."

"And who are the women?"

"One is a Mrs. Elizabeth Cutter, widow, lives in a small house on the outskirts of the village; the other, a Miss Easting, lives a mile away. Both live alone."

"Did you get into either house?"

"I tried to, but couldn't make it. They seemed to be very suspicious of strangers. Miss Easting turned the dog on me."

"Did you notice that either of these women took snuff?"

"One of them looked it. She was sallow, and seemed to have smears of brown in the corners of her mouth."

"Which one was it?"

"Mrs. Cutter."

"Very good. That is all. Thank you for what you've done. Good day."

In a flash Astro had sprung to a messenger call on the wall and pressed down the handle. Then he scribbled a message on a telegraph blank and handed it to Valeska. It read as follows:

> "Come immediately to the Beau Rivage. Important. P. S."

"Give that to the boy when he comes. Where's my revolver? Good! Telephone immediately to Calendon to take the next train for Antwerp, and meet me at the station. I don't want to miss it." He threw himself into a heavy overcoat, slipped the revolver into a pocket, jammed on his hat, and was off before Valeska could question.

She waited in the studio, however, so absorbed had she become in the mystery, so much she feared that, when Astro did return, it would be with some dreadful news.

It was late in the evening when a telegraph boy arrived with a message for her. Eagerly she tore it open. It read:

> "Problem 294: White knight to king's fourth; black rook to queen's bishop's third: white king's rook's pawn to seventh, check; black queen's bishop to king's knight's third, mate. Please file.
>
> A."

Valeska was never more exasperated in her life. Only the solution to a knotty chess problem!

When Calendon alighted on the platform at Antwerp, at eight o'clock that evening, he was met in the shade of the station by Astro and a burly local constable.

"Plenty of time and a clear field, I think," said Astro, his eyes dancing with the anticipation of peril imminent; "and unless I'm very much mistaken in my understanding, Mr. Calendon, I'll have some pleasant news for you before long."

"I hope to heaven you will!" said the old man. "I can't stand this much longer. I've sent Mrs. Calendon to the hospital. Her nerves have quite given away under the strain. I only hope that if we get the boy we'll find the dastard who stole him as well!" His look was grim.

"I am afraid you won't get that opportunity, however," said the mystic, drawing out his watch and pausing to inspect it under a gas lamp. "Mr. Stacey was born under an evil planet and in an evil House of the Heavens. At the present moment he is under arrest in the Beau Rivage apartments. One of his accomplices has just left here for New York, where she will be met by the police. Another will soon be taken. I have been waiting for one more of the gang who is engaged in a shady business hereabouts. We need only him to solve the last shreds of mystery in this affair. I've already seen him in my crystals, dressed in black. It remains to find him on the material plane."

They walked rapidly through the outskirts of the village, past a stretch of open country.

Calendon, nervously excited, spoke only once, to say, "There must have been some change of affairs, Astro; for so far as I can find the gang didn't speculate to-day in the stocks I tipped off in *The Era.* I had a circle of my friends attempting to influence the market; but it got away from them altogether. We simply couldn't sell enough to make any effect. The Fountainet Company common stock jumped seven points, when I sold out, and I'm about fifty thousand ahead of the game. If my son is restored to me, I'll have good cause to be happy to-night." He relapsed into silence.

They were now approaching a lonely house, back from the road, and in utter darkness. Astro strode up to the front door and knocked. There was no response. The constable unlocked the door with a skeleton key, and all three men entered. A lighted kerosene lamp was found in the kitchen. Hardly had it been brought into the front room when Calendon stooped and picked up a child's shirt.

"It's my son's, I'm sure!" he exclaimed in excitement. "Harold! Harold!" he cried aloud, and began a hasty search through the rooms. He was followed by Astro and the constable; but, after a thorough inspection, no living thing was found except a canary, which, awakened by the disturbance, warbled shrilly in the sitting-room.

The constable threw open the cellar door, and taking the lamp, stumbled down the narrow steps.

In another moment there came a stifled exclamation from below. Calendon dashed down in terror.

Suddenly, up-stairs, where Astro had momentarily remained, there was heard the sound of footsteps. Then a gruff voice broke out:

"I've got you fellers now! I've tracked you for five days, and now, by hickey, I'll make you pay for it! You'll never snatch another body, curse you!"

There was a shuffling of feet, and Astro's voice rang steadily: "Throw up your hands and drop that gun! You're a pretty character to call names! I think you'll show up well when you're investigated! Constable Jenkins, come up here!" He kicked loudly on the floor.

"By Jove! It's the coroner!" said the constable, appearing in the doorway.

"Is there a body here?" the coroner inquired.

"Yes—why?" Now Calendon appeared, most puzzled and alarmed of all.

"It's all right, Mr. Calendon, we're on their trail now!" said Astro.

Calendon groaned.

"Your boy is safe and unmutilated. I have suspected this a long time, but I didn't dare let you hope. Now, Coroner, tell your story."

"Why," he began, turning shamefacedly to the constable, "it's this way, Jim. I was comin' along the road last Friday with my outfit an' three of them poorhouse folks' bodies, y'know, an' blamed if the hind axle didn't break short off about a mile up back o' here. I had to walk clean back to Joe Miller's house for a scantlin' to prop up the axle with, an' I was gone about three-quarters of an hour. When I come back I see one of the coffins was gone,—the little one,—a boy it was. An' I see the axle had been sawed half through with a hack saw. Somebody had laid for me just to steal that—"

"And will you please explain," said Astro suavely, "why you were burying these bodies, for which you are paid by the township, at night?"

The coroner's face fell. "Oh, I was too busy day times," he said lamely.

"I think it had best be looked into, Constable. I can see where our friend the coroner makes a very pretty little income from the medical students, and does the town out of a few burials occasionally. But we must go on, Mr. Calendon. I had hoped that the boy was here. We must hurry to the other house. It's a mile away. We'll take your rig, Coroner, while you attend to the remains in the cellar."

The three men hurried outdoors, and the constable drove at breakneck pace to Miss Easting's house. Arrived there, they knocked loudly, and, there being no immediate answer, the constable entered.

Calendon followed close behind. "Harold! Harold!" he called loudly.

There was no reply; but a door slammed up-stairs, and a pattering of feet was heard. Calendon fairly floundered up and threw open the door. There was still no one in sight; but a tumbled bed showed where some one had lain. A boy's clothes were scattered about the room, a few playthings were on the floor.

Astro, who had followed on the father's heels, made directly for a closed door and wrenched it open. There sat a little boy in his red flannel nightgown, caressing a large glass jar of jam. His round chubby cheeks were stained with strawberry.

Then, before his father could reach for him in exultation, the child exclaimed joyfully, "I don't care. I liked it, and I tooked it, and I eated it, and I don't care! I don't!"

And, after the frightful strain that had been on the three men who gazed down at the boy, they all broke into a hearty laugh.

It was Harold Calendon, and he was perfectly happy. But there were several others there who were happy, too.

MISS DALRYMPLE'S LOCKET

"OH, dear, she's come to see you again!" said Valeska, making a very pretty picture as she stood in the doorway, framed by the black velvet portières.

Astro the Seer followed his first indulgent look by a second questioning, curious glance. "Who is it?"

She put her head on one side and looked at him coquettishly. "A lady," she said, tossing her head archly, "whom, among all your fashionable clients, I believe you consider the most charming, most delicious, the prettiest, the sweetest, the most—"

Astro laughed and nodded. "Miss Dalrymple?"

"The same. She was here only last week. It is very suspicious! Beware!" She shook a saucy finger at him and disappeared.

The young woman who next entered assuredly justified Valeska's adjectives. Indeed, many more might have been applied to her, though the smile that appeared on Astro's own handsome face best testified to her witchery. She was scarcely twenty years old, and of that dark, winning, dimpled, innocent type that few know how to resist. To this, there was an appealing look that flattered men's vanity. Were her brown eyes or her delectable smiling mouth the more lovely to look upon? Astro himself could not tell. Was it her easy well-bred grace or her ingenuous, girlish candor that most delighted him? He remembered her dainty hands, —perhaps the most exquisite he had ever seen. Now they were hidden in her sable muff. Her little rosy face shone like a flower under her picturesque veiled hat; her figure, slim and charmingly curved, was only partly modified by the smart lines of her black cloth suit.

She looked at him with big eyes and said, "Good afternoon, Mr. Astro. I hope you haven't forgotten me."

"Scarcely," was his reply. His tone was flattering.

She smiled with innocent roguery, her eyes exploring the curious decorations of the great studio. She sniffed daintily at the pleasant smell of myrrh that filled the air as she took the seat he offered her.

"I have come for help," she said. "I'm awfully puzzled about something, and you told me such wonderful things last time I came, that I thought I'd ask you." She showed a line of snow-white little teeth.

The Master rested his head negligently on one slender hand, and nodded gravely.

"It's about a locket," she continued.

"Ah! You have lost one?"

"No, not at all. I have found one!"

Astro raised his eyebrows.

"Oh, you're partly right, too; for it was lost a long time ago, and I have just got it back in a rather remarkable way. You see, it used to belong to my mother. She died last year. I returned only in time to see her for two hours before the end."

"When did you see this locket last?"

"Long before mother died. It disappeared mysteriously when I was abroad. Only yesterday it was returned to me by mail, addressed to me at my house in Yonkers, in a handwriting that I can't recognize."

"Well, I don't see what you are troubled about, then, if you have got it back."

Miss Dalrymple looked thoughtfully at him for a moment, her cheek resting on her white-gloved hand, as if not quite sure how to express what she meant. Finally she said impulsively, "Well, it's something so vague and silly it seems absurd to speak to you about it. But Fanny and I have been talking it over and wondering where it came from, and everything, and we both have a sort of queer feeling that it has something to do, perhaps, with a certain letter my mother once had."

"Wait a moment. Who is Fanny?"

"Oh, she's my maid—and she's a treasure. Indeed, she is more like a friend to me than a maid."

"How long have you had her?"

"Oh, ever since mother died."

The Seer frowned slightly. "Go on,—about the letter."

"You've heard about my father's will, and the lawsuit, haven't you? The papers have had a lot about it."

"Oh, yes, the Dalrymple will case. Let's see—your father was divorced from your mother, wasn't he?"

"Yes; but he wasn't at all happy with the woman he married afterward—she's a vixen—and he always regretted that he had left my mother. This Mrs. Dalrymple is contesting the will that father made in favor of my mother. She isn't satisfied with her widow's third."

"And, by that will, you are the legal heir to the rest of the estate?"

"Of course. But the other side has claimed that it was a forgery, and, as he left all his property to his divorced wife, they have a fair case, unless we can prove that the will was genuine. Unfortunately, though the will is in our possession, having been given to mother, both the witnesses to it are dead."

"I see," said Astro, "and the letter you mentioned?"

"Was from my father to my mother, telling her that he had left her all his property. You see how important it would be to our case; but I haven't been able to find it anywhere."

"Yes, but how does the locket come into it?"

"That's what I don't know myself. That's why I came to you," Miss Dalrymple exclaimed eagerly. "I can't describe why, but I do feel that the locket has something to do with it; for my mother was delirious just before she died, and talked about the letter and the locket. She kept saying that she had been robbed —or perhaps she only feared it. Then the locket was restored so providentially, just in time; for the case is to come to court next week. Then I remember that before I went away mother was very careful of it, and kept it locked up."

"Let me see it," said the Master of Mysteries.

She unbuttoned her coat and took it from a gold chain about her neck,—a small oval gold locket such as was commonly worn in the sixties. The cover, being opened, disclosed a small photograph of a beautiful woman in an old-fashioned round bonnet with roses framing the calm serious face.

Astro inspected it admiringly.

"That's my mother," said Miss Dalrymple, looking over his shoulder.

"It is hardly necessary to explain that. I see now where you get your beauty." With a deft movement of his thumb nail, Astro opened the inner rim and removed the photograph. The back of the paper was covered with Greek letters written microscopically in ink, as follows:

Δαν σλεγ αρ θενα νδε σςου
σλερος εβυχ λεπ λυςνε αρλε π
ομ μιερ

"Oh!" the girl cried excitedly, "I knew it! I knew there was something to be found out! It's Greek, isn't it? Oh, I hope you read Greek! Do you?"

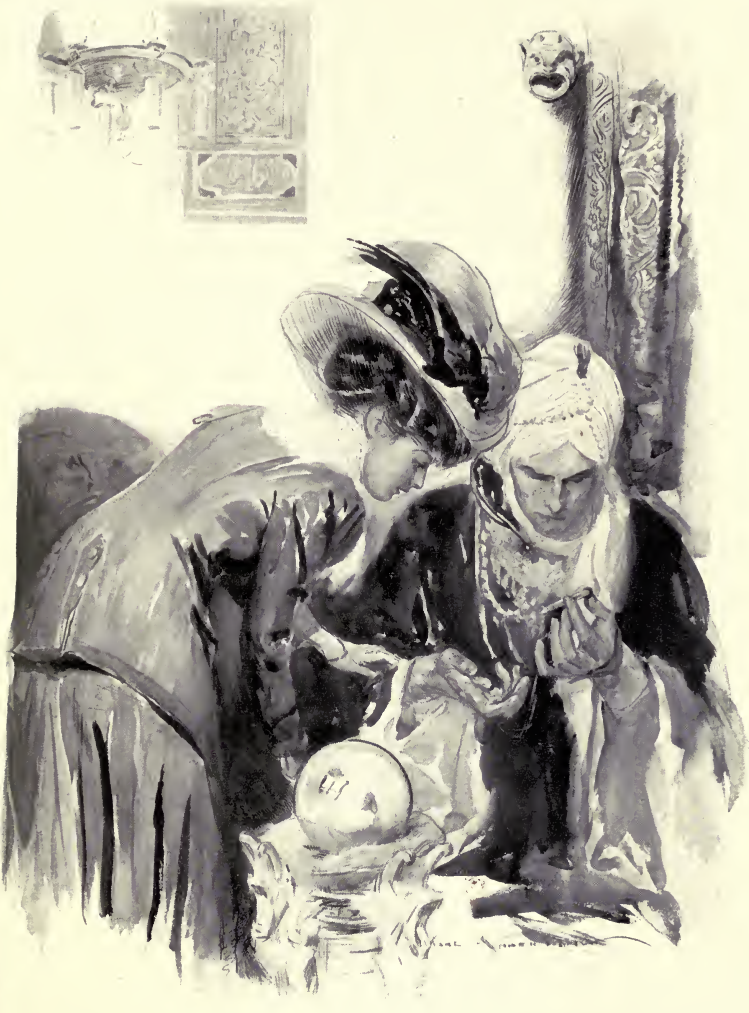
Astro smiled. "I read Greek as well as I do English; but this, unfortunately, isn't Greek at all."

"Why, isn't it? I know some of the letters myself. Look there—isn't that a Delta, and that Alpha and Pi?"

"Yes, the letters are Greek characters, but they are not Greek words. It's a cipher, Miss Dalrymple."

The girl's face fell. "Oh!" she breathed. In her excitement she was almost leaning on his shoulder. She clasped his arm unconsciously as she added, "Surely you can read it? You have solved so many mysteries; you have such wonderful occult power! I've heard that any cipher ever invented could be solved."

"And so it can. I have solved harder ones than this, I'm sure. Yes, your locket is certainly getting interesting. I'm sorry that I am too busy now to work on



"I knew there was something to be found out!" "It's Greek, isn't it?"

it, though. I have several appointments that can't be postponed. Suppose I wire you as soon as I have read it. Or, better, I'll send you the solution direct by a messenger."

"All right. I'll be dying of impatience; so I hope you'll hurry."

"I'll promise it some time to-morrow. But another question: Did your mother read Greek?"

"Oh, yes, she had a magnificent education."

"And how about the second Mrs. Dalrymple?"

The girl's lips curled. "I should say not! Why, she was an ordinary chorus girl when father married her!"

"Well," said the Seer, rising to assume a poetic attitude, "I shall consult my crystals and see what I can find out. If I am not mistaken, though, the will will be probated and you will come into your inheritance. And I shall be the first to congratulate you!"

After a quick friendly hand-shake, like a boy's, Miss Dalrymple walked gracefully out of the room.

As soon as she had left, Astro called his assistant and showed her the cipher. Valeska pored over it without speaking for some time. Finally she sighed and said pathetically, "What a pity I don't know Greek!"

"Cheer up!" said the Master, with a whimsical grimace. "You probably know as much about it as the one who composed this childish little cryptogram did. It has the mark of the tyro upon it."

"Why! how could you tell that?"

"Suppose a Fiji Islander attempted to copy a lot of English—that is, the so-called Latin alphabet.

Wouldn't you be able to tell instantly that he was ignorant of the English language? It's the same here. Any one who is used to writing Greek would form the letters easily and swiftly; would write, in short, a pure cursive hand. These Greek letters here are all laboriously copied from some school-book or dictionary."

"Well, who wrote it?"

"My dear Valeska," said Astro soberly, "the infinitesimal vibrations from this locket will, if I absorb myself in contemplation, set up sympathetic waves in my own aura. I am not yet ready to go into a psychic trance. Let us first read the message. It is ridiculously simple. I will first separate the message into words, for what here appears to be a set of words is merely letters run together with a few false spaces between them in order to baffle the first glance.

He took a pad of paper and wrote out the following in Greek characters:

Δανσ λε γαρθεν, ανδεοςουσ
λε ροςε βυχ, λε πλυς γεαλ
λε πομμιερ

When he had finished he looked up at her. "You surely know the Greek alphabet, at least?"

"Of course I know that much. We used to use it in boarding-school to write secret messages in. What girl that's ever had a 'frat' boy for a beau doesn't know the Greek alphabet?"

"Then this should read easily. Kindly write it out, letter for letter."

Valeska studied a minute, and then scribbled out:

Dans le garden au dessous le rose buch le plus near le pommier.

"Partly in English, partly in French, you see," said Astro. "One word, 'buch', looks like German, but it's not: 'In the garden under the rose bush nearest to the apple tree!' The Greek character Chi was the nearest the writer could get to the English 'sh,' you see, and note the use of the Sigma's, too. How childish to consider this a hard puzzle!"

"It is the location of Mrs. Dalrymple's missing letter, I suppose," ventured Valeska. "I suppose she was afraid it would be stolen, and so buried it there."

"You forget, however, that, if Mrs. Dalrymple was a good Greek scholar, she wouldn't have written this so laboriously."

Valeska looked quickly up at him. "Could some one have found the letter and buried it there for his own purpose?"

"It is possible; but it seems an unnecessary thing to do. The most suspicious thing about the cipher is that it is so easy."

"Then I give it up." Valeska shook her head sadly.

"Don't give up, little girl. Simply keep your mind on the fact that there are clever brains at work upon this unsuspecting young woman." He edged his chair over closer and tapped with his finger on the table. "Look here! Who stole this locket in the first place? Why was it stolen? Was the person who took it the one who returned it? Or was the person who returned it a friend of Miss Dalrymple's? If he or she were, why should the action be done anonymously? Did this person know about the cipher? If so, why leave the cipher there where she could find it and dig up the letter? Several things look suspicious to me. I must go over every point and analyze it. We must, in beginning any case of this sort, cast about immediately and find out who are the actors in the drama, who are the ones who will suffer or be benefited by this chain of circumstances.

"Now," he straightened up abruptly, "we must know more about Miss Dalrymple's household. To-morrow morning you shall make the trip to Yonkers, ostensibly to return her this locket with our solution of the cipher, but actually to enable you to inspect the house, grounds, servants, family history, and the like."

At once Valeska became businesslike. "Anything else?"

"Yes," he said emphatically. "Tell her that on no account whatsoever is she to dig beneath the rose bush until she hears from me! Understand?"

Valeska returned next noon with the information that Miss Dalrymple was in high spirits over the solution of the secret message.

"Did you tell her not to dig up the place until I came?"

"Yes, and she promised to wait."

"Well, what else?"

Valeska sniffed. "I certainly do not like that maid of hers. I may be only a woman without any more analytical brain than a sand-snipe, but I can tell a sniveling hypocrite of my own sex as far as I can see her. There's too much goody-goody talk to suit me. It was 'Yes, dear Miss Dalrymple,' and 'Oh, certainly, Miss Dalrymple,' and, behind her back, 'Isn't Miss Dalrymple the sweetest thing!' When I hear that kind of talk, I look out for a cat."

"You think she's two-faced?"

"Oh, she's a snake in the grass! Tall, lantern-jawed, skinny, smirking thing! As luck would have it, she caught the same train back to town that I did,—or rather she came down on the trolley-car just behind mine,—and I sat about three seats behind her when we got the subway at Kingsbridge. I thought I'd see where she went. It was an express, and she got off at Brooklyn Bridge. That's what kept me so long. I followed her over to Brooklyn."

Astro started. "Brooklyn?" he ejaculated.

"Yes." Valeska was evidently pleased that at last she had made some sort of sensation. "I shadowed her to number 1435 Fulton Avenue, waited half an hour, and, when she didn't come out, hurried back to report."

"Well," Astro spoke with a curious expression, "did you find out who lives there?"

The girl was crestfallen. "No. I entirely forgot that."

He threw it at her pointblank. "Mrs. Myra Dalrymple!"

For a moment she could only gaze at him in astonishment. Then, "Oh!" she cried. "Oh!" Her eyes blazed. "Didn't I say she was a snake? Why, then, Fanny is undoubtedly in the pay of the second wife! Think of it! She's been spying on that sweet innocent girl ever since her mother died, and has carried the news to Mrs. Dalrymple number two. It's outrageous!

"Oh, but—" Valeska sprang up in consternation and faced her master with a look of horror. "I forgot! Why, I translated the cipher to Miss Dalrymple while the maid was in the room! What will happen?"

Astro took up his water-pipe with perfect equanimity. "My dear, you seem to have made several very lucky blunders to-day."

She put her hands to her eyes. "Oh, I don't understand! What about this cipher message? Where did it come from?"

"Let us go at it analytically," he replied calmly. "For the sake of the argument, grant first that the cipher discloses the hiding-place of the lost letter, secreted by the first Mrs. Dalrymple. Very good. Let us suppose, also, as a second hypothesis, that the locket was sent by the second Mrs. Dalrymple, knowing of the cipher. Very good again. Now examine the two theories. Is it likely that such a person as this second wife would place a rival claimant to the estate in possession of the secret? No. Something is wrong, the first hypothesis, or the second. Take your pick. I say the first is wrong,—the cipher does *not* disclose the place of the letter, but the second is right: Mrs. Dalrymple sent it. We know that probably she knew Miss Dalrymple visited me, and believed in my power. She, therefore, intended Miss Dalrymple to dig in that spot, cleverly concealing her instrumentality in the matter. That's why the cipher was made so absurdly easy. Do you think it will be well for Miss Dalrymple to dig there? I don't."

He paused. "Now suppose the second hypothesis to be wrong,—that Mrs. Dalrymple did *not* send the locket. If any one else did, what reason could he have for making such a mystery of it? It would be absurd."

"I follow all that," said Valeska; "but I can't think why Mrs. Dalrymple would have any motive for inducing Miss Dalrymple to dig in the garden."

"I think you forget the second Mrs. Dalrymple's character. But you can study it out. What I intend to do is to call on Mrs. Dalrymple this evening and find out. I have a very good case against her, I think, and I intend to make her give up that letter, if she has it. Of course it may have been destroyed, but I don't quite believe it. It is common for criminals, especially women, to refrain from actually destroying the very evidence that may convict them. From some scruple or fear they seldom do it. At any rate, I shall frighten her with what I suspect of her actions in the past, and use my positive knowledge of Fanny's services."

"But what is hidden in the garden? Anything? And if so, how did it get there?"

"Was there no one besides Miss Dalrymple and Fanny living in the house? No other servants?"

Valeska shook her head, then reflected for an instant. "I did hear something about a gardener—" She stopped and stared at him.

He nodded. "I think that probably completes the last link of the chain. At any rate, I'm willing to risk it. Well, I'll go right over to Brooklyn and have it out. Meet me at the Grand Central Station to-night in time for the eleven-thirty-six train for Yonkers, and we'll see the whole thing through this very night."

Valeska's eyes danced. "I'll be there, with my own little revolver! I hope it will be exciting!"

She was at the station at eleven-thirty, and waited until the train had pulled out without seeing the Master. A half-hour and then a full hour passed without his appearance. She had begun to be alarmed seriously, when, at a quarter past one, she saw him walking rapidly across the great waiting-room toward her. She gave an exclamation of relief; but at once he took her arm and ran her toward the subway.

"Hurry!" he cried in a tense voice. "We can't wait for the one-thirty; so we'll have to make it by the subway and change to the trolley. We have no time to lose! It's serious!"

They caught the train with less than a minute's margin; and once settled in the car, Valeska turned to him anxiously.

"I was a fool to let Miss Dalrymple have the translation!" he said. "It was the only serious error I have made in a year. I hope to heaven I may save her yet; but it's a toss-up now!"

"What is it?" Valeska shouted above the shriek of the wheels.

Astro said nothing. Seeing that he was too deeply moved to explain, she pressed him no further, covertly watching his restless nervous gestures and his drawn expression all through the ride until the trolley slowed down at Yonkers and stopped on the main street. A solitary cab was standing beside the curb, its driver dozing on the box.

A fat man was waddling hurriedly ahead of them, signaling with his umbrella to the driver; but Astro, with a rough gesture, threw him aside, ran to the cab, and pushed Valeska quickly inside.

"To Miss Dalrymple's, out on Broadway, and drive like lightning!" he ordered. Then he jumped in himself, and slammed the door in the face of the enraged fat man who was in quick pursuit. The cab drove off at headlong speed.

Still Valeska kept silent; but now she shared the excitement of the Master, who bit his knuckles nervously as the horse galloped along the avenue high above the river. All she could hear besides the pounding of hoofs was the muttering of the dark man by her side. It seemed an hour's drive, so had the suspense wrought upon her,—tree by tree, lamp by lamp, house by house, they advanced. She was now prepared for anything,—for anything save what happened.

At last the carriage slowed down and came to a stop. Before the driver had a chance to dismount, Astro had dashed out without paying the least attention to his assistant. She hurried after him.

The Dalrymple house stood on the side of the hill, overlooking the quiet moonlit Hudson. It was surrounded by a high wall, over the tops of which showed the thick limbs of a few apple trees. The house loomed beyond, a brick edifice of two stories. The iron gate in the wall was locked, and Astro jerked viciously at the bell.

At this moment, as if he himself had set it off, a loud explosion reverberated through the night. A woman's scream was next heard, rising in a piercing staccato. Then all was silence again. At length a shutter was thrown open at one of the front windows of the house, and a shaft of light made a brilliant path through the deep shadow. A woman's head appeared.

"What is it?" cried Valeska in terror. "Is Miss Dalrymple shot?"

"God knows!" Astro muttered grimly. "Help me over the wall. Give me a foot up, Valeska. We're too late, as I feared; but I must find out what has happened. Driver," he yelled back over his shoulder, "go for a doctor as quick as you can!"

In an instant he had mounted the top of the wall and dropped to the other side. Valeska heard his footsteps running up the gravel walk. After that she waited some time in silence. The cab had driven off with a clatter.

When, after a wait that seemed interminable, Astro returned, Valeska's eyes stared to see him with Miss Dalrymple, who was apparently unharmed. She wore a long mackintosh cape, covering her night dress, and her hair was disordered. A look of horror on her pretty face made her seem a woman almost for the first time. She unlocked the gate and put her slender white arms about Valeska.

"What has happened?" exclaimed the latter.

"What I feared; only, thank heaven, not to Miss Dalrymple!" was Astro's solemn response. "Come this way and you'll see."

He led the way past an apple tree at the side of the house. A few paces beyond this a great hole was torn in the earth, and, by its jagged appearance and slanting sides, it was evident that it had been made by some explosive. Behind a rose bush lay a woman's body.

"Fanny," said Astro.

Miss Dalrymple sank beside her maid and began to weep silently.

"Do you understand now?" said Astro to his assistant.

"What a fiend!" she cried. "Her stepmother meant this trap for Miss Dalrymple! She buried an infernal machine here! But how was it exploded?"

Astro pointed to the motionless body. "The reason why I did not caution Miss Dalrymple not to show her maid the translation of the cipher was because I wanted the second Mrs. Dalrymple to believe that her hellish trick was going to be successful. I was afraid Miss Dalrymple's curiosity would induce her to dig under the rose bush before I came. To-night I wrung a confession from her stepmother revealing this whole frightful business. That's why I hurried. But I had no idea of Fanny's duplicity. Evidently, though she was a spy for the Brooklyn woman, she did not have her complete confidence. Fanny thought she would get the letter before Miss Dalrymple dug it up, and use it to extort money. You see how well she has succeeded."

"Oh! is she dead?" whispered Valeska.

"Luckily, no; only stunned. Mrs. Myra Dalrymple probably won't have to go to the electric chair for it, though she deserves it richly. But, at least, there will be no more contest over the will. In the first place, I got the letter from her to-night; in the second, if I hadn't, we could prevent her opposition by our knowledge of this crime. She'll leave the country to-morrow."

The cab was now heard. It stopped, and the driver, with a physician, came running up the walk.

"There has been a little accident here," said Astro suavely. "A buried gasoline tank exploded, and this woman was injured, doctor. Carry her into the house and do what you can for her."

Miss Dalrymple, who had been listening wide-eyed to the conversation, a ravishing figure in the moonlight in her charmingly disheveled state, now put her hand on Astro's arm.

"But I don't understand at all," she said, "except that Fanny has been deceiving me for a year. Do you mean to say that Mrs. Dalrymple put that cipher in the locket herself and sent it to me?"

"Certainly," said Astro, "and a very clever trick it was."

"But why did she do it that way?" the young girl inquired, still baffled. "Why was she so elaborate about it?"

"Because," replied the Master of Mysteries, with a lurking smile, "she knew a great deal more about human nature than you do, and a good deal less than I, that's all!"

NUMBER THIRTEEN

RECLINING on a huge velvet divan, puffing at his water-pipe lazily, Astro read to the last page of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde,* and then tossed the paper-covered book on the floor with a grunt.

Valeska looked up from her work, ready for his comment.

"If Stevenson had written that book this year, he'd have known more about dissociated personality," he remarked.

"Why, it's nothing but a parable, that's all," Valeska offered.

"Well, it might be more; it might be science as well. The fundamental idea is wrong. We haven't only two souls or personalities apiece, one good, one bad; we have an infinite number, according to modern psychology. Our normal self can break up into any number of combinations of its elements. That is why we are different persons when we're angry, when we dream, when we are drunk or insane."

"But isn't there a subconscious self that runs the body at such times?" said Valeska. "I've been reading about it. Some psychologists call it the 'subliminal' self."

"Rubbish!" Astro rose and walked up and down nervously. "They are not psychologists; they are metaphysicians, and not worth considering. They speak as if there were a sort of secret submerged soul coiled up inside us like a chicken in an egg. An oracle in a well! There is no such thing. We are all of a piece!"

"But how about somnambulists who diagnose their own complaints and predict the course of their illness? How about the known cases of multiple personality,—Felida X and Miss Beauchamp in Boston? Their alternate selves were distinct and separate."

"You should read *The Journal of Abnormal Psychology,*" said Astro. "Those selves are fortuitous combinations of the normal self's properties; they are, strictly, part-selves. The subjects are simply not 'all there'."

"And those post-hypnotic time experiments, too?" she persisted. "I have read of their suggesting that a subject should, just fifteen hundred and forty-seven minutes afterward, look at his watch and write down the time. He did it, in every such case."

"And you think he has a subliminal self, a sort of psychic alarm clock, that telephones to his waking personality? Nonsense! They managed to tap the mechanical part of his memory, that's all. It's like looking up a book in a library. There are no co-conscious personalities. What happens in 'automatic writing'? A person holds a pencil in his hand, and it seems to write of itself. Spirits? Rubbish! A subliminal self? Poppycock! The hand transcribes merely records of thoughts or memories that have been forgotten or were unnoticed, that's all. We don't think of half we see and hear; we pass myriads of faces in the street, for instance; but everything is recorded, as on a phonographic cylinder, and, under abnormal conditions, the record may be reproduced."

"Well," said Valeska, "it's all uncanny. Normal psychology is difficult enough to understand; but when one is four or five different persons I give up. How many am I?" she added merrily, tossing a mischievous glance at him, as she put on her hat and furs.

"You're a million—each nicer than the rest."

"Then I'm glad!" She looked very demure as she walked toward the door; but she stopped there to smile frankly back at him, then threw him a good night and vanished.

Astro yawned, went to the bookcase, and returned to the couch with a book by Leonide Keating. For a while he labored with his grandiloquent mysticism, with the secret of Om and the central crystal of the universe; then suddenly he sat erect. A noise in the outer room had attracted his attention. Another moment told him that Valeska had returned and was speaking to some one. His name was called.

He went out, to find her with a strange girl, strangely clad. Dark-haired and dark-skinned, handsome, oriental, she was of medium height, with a red shawl drawn about her head, and a short plaid skirt, showing her little feet incased in men's heavy shoes. She had a wild frightened look in her eyes, as Valeska tried to calm her. Her mouth trembled pitifully, and she crouched in an attitude of fear and self-effacement. She looked quickly round at Astro, and ran for the door. Evidently she saw a new terror in him, and trembled all over with excitement. It was all Valeska could do to restrain her.

Astro looked the girl over deliberately, noting every detail of countenance and costume, then he raised his eyebrows.

"It's the strangest thing!" Valeska explained. "I was walking along Thirty-fourth Street when I met her, and as I passed I thought that she was probably some Italian organ-grinder's wife. Then she turned back and ran up to me and seized my hand. She was evidently terribly frightened at something; but she wouldn't speak. I haven't been able to get her to speak yet. She seemed to want my protection; so I brought her back here. Who do you suppose she can be?"

Astro addressed the girl in Italian; but got no response. The girl eyed him as a dog watches the boy who has been torturing him. A question in Russian was as unsuccessful. Greek, Turkish, Yiddish,—she appeared to understand none of these, or else refused to answer. The Master of Mysteries became interested.

"Bring her into the studio," he said to Valeska. "We'll have something to eat here. Perhaps she is hungry. If so, that will gain us her confidence." So saying, he went to the telephone and ordered a dinner for three sent up from a near-by restaurant.

As Valeska gently led the stranger toward the entrance to the studio, the girl suddenly gave a wail, clasped her hands to her bosom, and stared fixedly, in an ecstasy of terror, at the office wall. There was a large one-day calendar there above Valeska's desk, the sheet showing the words, "Thursday, May 13." Astro hurried to the girl's side, watching her keenly. Valeska put her arms about her reassuringly; but it was not till she had drawn her softly away from the sight of the calendar that the girl's perturbation was over. She walked doggedly into the great dim studio, as if half-asleep. Valeska, with friendly insistence, placed her in a comfortable chair. There the girl sat, staring with expressionless face at the light.

"Well," said Valeska, as they watched her, waiting for the dinner to be bought in, "is she deaf, or dumb, or half-witted, or drugged, or what?"

Astro had not taken his eyes from the figure of his mysterious visitor. "She's an oriental, of course. That is why she's afraid of me. She has been through some terrible nervous ordeal, I think. I believe she hasn't had enough to eat. Wait till we have had dinner, and then I'll see what I can do with her. Poor thing! I'm glad it was you and not a police officer who found her, Valeska."

The girl began to look about timidly, but with little apparent curiosity. Valeska undid her shawl from her head. A wave of black, fine, curly hair fell with the covering and made the face more picturesque. She nestled a little closer to her protector; held Valeska's hand to her own cheek. The two, vividly blond and brunette, made a striking picture together.

On Astro's table was a small desk calendar, with a memorandum sheet for each day. He quietly took it up and placed it in the girl's lap. Instantly she had a new fit of terror, and leaped up in alarm. Standing in the full light of the electric lamp, they could see her mouth working convulsively as she stared at the number 13. She started on a run for the door. Valeska, quicker than Astro, caught and held her, and again attempted to soothe her.

"Oh, don't try any more experiments with her yet!" she implored. "The poor thing can't stand it. She is suffering so that it makes my heart ache. What can be the matter?"

"Aphasia, for one thing," said Astro, seating himself a little way off. "She tried to speak hard enough; but she couldn't. The girl is not deaf or dumb, anyway. It is growing decidedly interesting."

By degrees the girl was coaxed back to the chair, and by the time the dinner had been brought in she was more easily persuaded to take a seat at the table beside Valeska. Indeed, it was evident that she was nearly starving. She ate ravenously, with great mouthfuls, picking up the food in her hands. She was not to the manner born, but her prettiness made her solecisms pardonable. Once or twice during the meal she stopped, looked at Valeska, and seemed to be trying to speak; but no words came. Her hunger satisfied, she seemed more tractable and courageous. She looked at Astro without fear. Toward Valeska, she showed the devotion of a dog.

The table cleared away, Astro took a sheet of paper and wrote down the number 13. The girl trembled, but now not so violently. She looked up at Valeska with a mute appeal.

"Don't!" said Valeska.

Astro wrote a column of three figures: 6, 5, and 2. The girl stared at it without intelligence. The Roman numerals XIII did not excite her at all. Next, he wrote the word "thirteen"; she was still unmoved. He spoke the word; no response. Then he placed the paper in front of her, and put the pencil in her hand. She took it with evident familiarity, and her hand trembled. They saw her bite her lip—she was indubitably attempting to communicate with them—but she was unable to make a mark on the sheet.

"H'm!" said Astro thoughtfully. "Agraphia, as well. Now we're getting warmer. I think I shall get it after a while."

"Why, to me it seems more impossible than ever!" Valeska said.

"Strange that we should have just been talking about it," he replied. "It's a case of lost identity, disassociated personality, beyond doubt. I think I can solve the riddle if I can hypnotize her. I'll try."

He did try, but without avail. At his first mesmeric gestures she shrank from him in fear. As he persisted, trying with a crystal ball held in front of and above her eyes, to send her into a hypnotic sleep by means of a partial paralysis of the optic nerve, she resolutely defended herself. The strangeness of his motions aroused her suspicion, and she refused to concentrate her attention sufficiently to be influenced. Direct verbal suggestion, the simplest and most effective method of inducing hypnosis, was of course out of the question, since she did not appear to understand any language he spoke.

"There is only one other method, if even that will succeed," Astro said at last. "If we can get her to write automatically, we may learn something. Her agraphia prevents her writing with her conscious mind. We'll try what is called the method of 'abstraction'. It is a common experiment. One holds his patient absorbed in a conversation that compels his utmost mental capacity,—in Hebrew, for instance, if he understands Hebrew,—and while that is going on some one places a pencil in his hand and whispers in his ear. What you have called the 'subconscious self' communicates by writing, and the normal conscious personality is unaware that he is writing."

"But how can we engage her mind so absorbingly?" Valeska asked hopelessly. "We don't know her language, whatever it may be."

Astro paced the room for several minutes, thinking deeply. He stopped occasionally to look at the girl fixedly, and resumed his contemplation. Finally he went up to her, examined her palms, and his face lighted up.

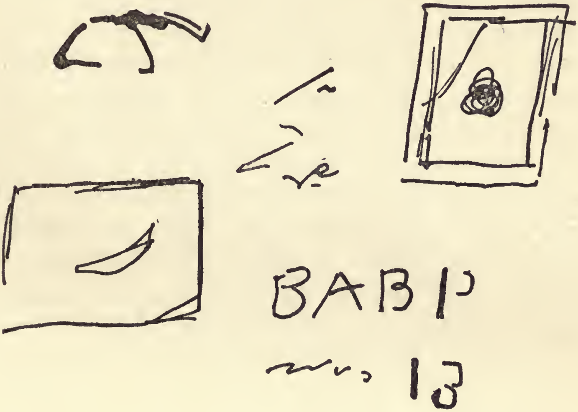
"I believe she's musical!" he said.

Valeska stared. "But then—"

"We'll see. Have the pencil ready to put in her hand, and the paper on the table by it. Watch her closely, and see if she is affected by the music. If she seems to be, give her the pencil."

With that, he walked to the piano, sat down, and began to play the tenth rhapsody of Liszt. As he swung into the abandon of its more temperamental passages, he seemed himself to be absorbed, to lose himself in the intricate harmonies. He was a skilled and artistic musician. He swayed to and fro, giving himself up physically and mentally to the passion and beauty of the themes, and it was not till the echoes of the last divine chords had ceased reverberating that he slowly turned on the piano stool and seemed to awaken.

"I've got it!" cried Valeska, and, springing up, she ran over and handed him a sheet of paper. It was partly covered with rude drawings, apparently meaningless rough sketches, mingled with attempts at lettering:



He took the sheet eagerly, and went to the table under the electric lamp to scrutinize the figures.

"It's not very promising material, is it?" said Valeska.

"On the contrary, it's a fine beginning; only it will take a bit of doing to make it out."

"I see the fatal 13 has put in its appearance again."

The girl, who had seemed to be in a sort of stupor, now leaned over the table and inspected the sheet. At sight of the figures 13 she gave a moan, and threw her arms about Valeska, trembling all over.

"Poor girl!" said Astro. "I'm afraid there's something big back of all this. She's a Turk, or an Armenian, or a Syrian. See the Turkish flag that she has roughly drawn here? . . . *Babi* . . . Wait!"

He had risen to go to the bookcase, when the girl reached over and would have seized the paper, had not Valeska prevented her. Astro turned to ejaculate:

"Babi?" and again, *"Baha-Ullah?"*

The girl quivered; but did not speak.

"She may be a member of the Bahai sect, followers of the Bab, the Incarnation of the Almighty, whose religion is not tolerated by the faithful in Persia. They are all kept to one city, where they live like primitive Christians; indeed, their faith is a mixture of Christianity and Mohammedanism. We'll see. Valeska, she's had enough for to-night. You must take her home and take care of her, and bring her back to-morrow. Until then I must stay up and think it out."

For hours after Valeska had left with her ward, Astro walked up and down the length of the great dim studio. Occasionally he threw himself at full length on the big couch in concentrated thought. At intervals he stood erect, his eyes fixed in abstraction on some trophy of arms on the wall, or gazing into the lucent transparency of his crystal ball. Once or twice he sat down at the table and gazed long at the hieroglyphic marks made on the paper by the strange girl. At three in the morning, he partially undressed and lay down on the couch to sleep. He rose at seven, bathed, and went outdoors for a walk.

When he returned, an hour later, Valeska was in the studio alone. Her eyes were red; she seemed ashamed and self-reproachful.

"The girl has disappeared!" she exclaimed the moment Astro appeared. "When I woke up, she wasn't in the room. She must have risen and dressed while I was asleep. But I found this." She held out a short curved dagger, in a morocco sheath.

Astro, withdrawing the blade, found it was engraved with an Arabic inscription. He read the motto aloud:

"For the heart of a dog, the tongue of a serpent!"

"Ah!" he commented, "this may help some. Our little friend apparently isn't so timid as she appeared. But, somehow, this doesn't look like the property of a Babist. In spite of their many persecutions, I believe they are usually non-resistants. Well, Valeska, we'll have to find the girl, now! Come along with me immediately."

His green limousine was already at the door in waiting. Both jumped in, and as they drove to the southern end of the city Astro explained:

"There are two Syrian quarters in New York. One is in Brooklyn, the other down on Washington Street, near the Battery. We'll go to that one first, and see what we can find there. The Turkish flag reminds me that that is often hung outside stores where they sell Turkish rugs. We'll try that clue afterward."

Reaching Washington Street, the two left the motor-car and walked toward the Battery, past rows of squalid houses. At every corner Astro stopped and gazed about deliberately.

Finally, he seized Valeska's arm with a quick gesture. "Look at that sign!" he exclaimed.

On West Street, facing the Hudson River, but with its rear abutting on a vacant lot on Washington Street, was a huge soap factory. Painted on the dead wall was a sign whose letters were eight or ten feet in height.

Valeska read it aloud: "Use Babrock's Brown Soap." She stopped and looked at Astro in bewilderment. "What about it?"

He drew the drawing from his pocket and pointed out the lettering. "Don't you see?" he cried. "'BABP!' That's a part of the sign, surely. Look at those two buildings on each side of the sign. Now look at this row of houses. From some one of those windows the sign must present the appearance she has drawn. Making the drawing subconsciously, she has merely copied something with which she has been familiar,—seeing it, probably, every day. We must find the window from which the sign looks just like her drawing."

He looked at the sign again carefully, estimating its height and the relative position of the two buildings whose roofs would cut off the first and last group of letters. A rough triangulation led him to a house in the lower part of which was a cobbler's shop. This he entered.

"Are there any rooms to let in this house?" he asked of the man at the bench.

The man nodded. "Go up-stairs and ask at second floor," he replied. "You see Garbon Soumissin; he keeps the house."

Up-stairs went Astro and Valeska, and plunged into a dark narrow hallway. A doorway opened part way and a whiskered man looked out. He had an evil face, blotched with red spots, and wore a fez. He was smoking a Turkish cigarette.

"What you want here?"

"I'd like to look at your front room, third floor."

A murmur of voices came from inside the room. The man turned and growled some foreign oath. Then he turned and looked at Astro with a vicious inquisition.

"All right," he said at last; "you go up. Door open. Three dollars a week."

Astro waited for no more; but ran up the stairs, followed by his assistant. Once out of earshot, he stopped for a moment to pull out the paper again, and pointed to the first drawing on the sheet. "Fez," he said, and looked at her meaningly.

"The old man with the cigarette?"

"Probably. Now we'll find out what they have been up to."

The hall bedroom was incredibly dirty, but contained nothing but a cot bed with vile coverings, a chair, and a crazy wash-stand, over which hung a square cracked mirror. Astro first went to the grimy window and looked out. He pointed to the sign, and Valeska followed his eyes. One of the buildings across the street cut off the first word, "use," and the other, with a small dormer, obscured all after "bab" with the exception of the upper half of the R. It showed, in fact, precisely as the girl had drawn it.

"This is the room, all right. Now let's examine it."

He took up the chair first, and looked it over carefully. Then he pointed to marks on the sides of the back, where the paint was worn smooth. The marks were about an inch wide, and similar ones showed on the legs and on the side rails of the seat.

"This is where straps have chafed the paint," he commented. "She was undoubtedly fastened securely.

Did you notice where the marks or bruises were on her?"

"Yes; they were bad enough for me to remember. There were red marks on her wrists and on her arms below her shoulders; and her arms were almost covered with bruises; but small ones."

"Oh, they pinched her, no doubt. Undoubtedly she had a rough time of it, if one may judge the character of the villain with the fez. Well, we must find her. There's no use inquiring here. If they have used this room for a torture chamber, we'll get nothing out of them, and they'll grow suspicious."

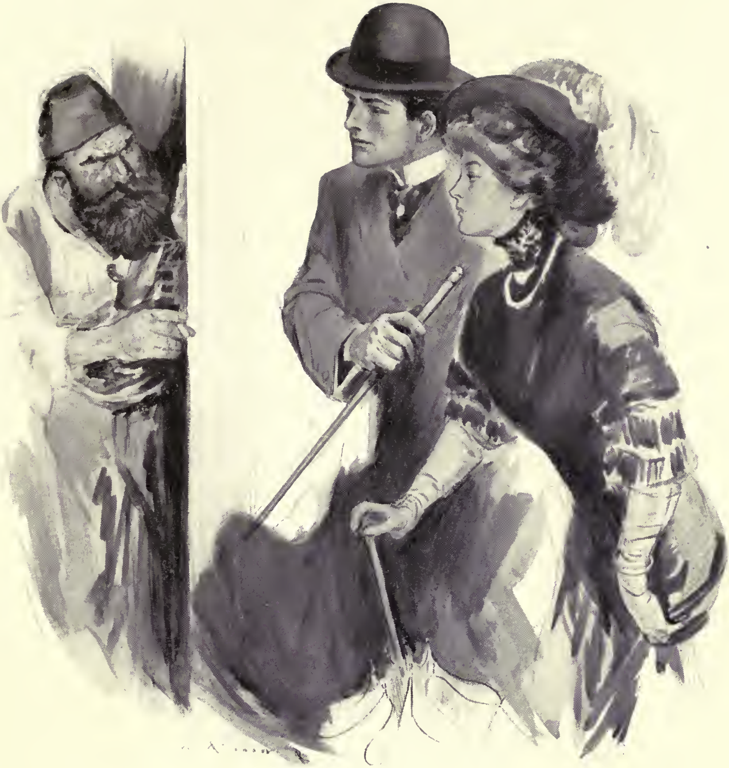
They went down-stairs, and, while Valeska waited in the street, Astro drove a bargain with Garbon Soumissin. Luckily the lower hall was dark, and the Turk could not perceive Astro's oriental countenance. But the Master of Mysteries had an important piece of news to tell when he rejoined Valeska.

"They were talking Arabic, or rather Turkish. I heard one of them quote the motto we saw on the dagger. Now I know what they are. Have you heard of the Hunchakists?"

The papers had been so full of one of the recent murders of this dreaded Armenian society, that Valeska knew roughly what the name implied.

"Every country seems to have its guerrilla assassins," said Astro, as they drove up-town. "But the Armenian Hunchakists are more dangerous than any of the others, because they are better organized. Their object is usually extortion. Now we must visit the rug merchants. I'm afraid we're on the track of something serious this time."

Their route led them directly into the heart of the



" All right," he said at last, " you go up. Door open "—

mystery. On Eighteenth Street, where, in front of a Turkish rug store, the crescent of Turkey hung out, there was a great crowd gathered, pressing about the entrance. It took Astro little time to discover the cause of the disturbance. The merchant, Marco Dyorian, had been found, when his shop was opened by his head bookkeeper, lying in a pool of blood in his office, shot in the back. He was not dead, though mortally wounded and unconscious. He was now at the hospital, at the point of death.

A policeman guarded the door, preventing any one from entering. Astro and Valeska caught sight of his cap over the heads of the bystanders, and when the crowd eddied they saw his face.

"Why, it's McGraw!"

"So it is!" said Astro. "What luck!"

They squirmed their way through the crowd, to find the burly police officer who, with Astro's assistance, had been able to gain considerable reputation in connection with the Macdougal Street dynamite outrages. The two were now fast friends. Indeed, McGraw owed his lieutenant's cap to the help of the Master of Mysteries. He therefore welcomed them both with a grin.

"What is the straight of this, McGraw?" Astro asked.

"Hunchakist murder, sure!" responded the lieutenant.

"I thought as much. Who did it?"

"Oh, we got 'em all right this time. No thanks to you, sir, for once, though I'd always be glad of your help. This one's a girl who done it."

Astro and Valeska looked at each other. "A girl?"

"Yes, sir. They'll be bringing her down presently. It's only fifteen minutes ago we got her. She was hiding out in a back closet where nobody thought to look at first. She was in a dead faint."

"What does she look like?"

"Faith, I don't know that myself. I've only just got here with the reserves. But if you stand here, you'll see her come down. There's the wagon already. Stand back there!"

The crowd scattered, and the patrol wagon drove up with a clatter. Several officers jumped out and ran up-stairs.

Astro turned to Valeska and spoke under his breath. "What time did you see her last?"

"I got up about midnight, and she was lying on the couch."

She put her hand on his arm. "Oh, it couldn't have been she!" she exclaimed.

At that moment the officers brought their prisoner down-stairs. It was indeed the girl who had been in the studio the night before, and had gone home with Valeska. Just as the group passed, Astro touched McGraw's shoulder.

"Let me speak to her a moment. I know this girl."

McGraw stared; but his faith in the occult powers of the Seer was so great that he delayed the officers. They stopped for a moment. Astro addressed the girl in Turkish.

"Let me help you," he said.

She looked at him sulkily. But it was not with the blank expressionless face of yesterday. Her brows drew together.

"I don't know you," she said at last.

Valeska pushed forward and took her hand.

"Don't you know this lady?" Astro asked.

The girl stared. Some half-forgotten memory seemed to stir within her. Her lips moved silently as she stared hard at Valeska's face. Then she shook her head, and said, "I don't know."

"I can't keep 'em waiting," McGraw whispered. "Let her go, and you can call at the Tombs to see her again. I'll see that you get in. Go on, now!"

The girl was escorted to the wagon and took her seat, facing the crowd stolidly, an officer on each side of her. Once, before they drove away, her eyes turned to where Valeska stood in the doorway, and the same puzzled expression crossed her face.

"McGraw," said Astro, after the wagon had gone, "how'd you like to get a captain's commission?"

McGraw hastily took him aside. "You don't mean to say you know about this job already?" he asked excitedly.

"I know one thing. A man you want lives at 101 Washington Street, and I think his name is Garbon Soumissin. At any rate, I'd advise you to get right down there immediately and run in every one you find in the house. Hurry up before they've gone!"

McGraw's eyes gleamed. "And you'll coach me then what to do?" he asked.

"Yes."

"All right." Hastily summoning a police sergeant, he gave him a few orders, and then hurried to the station.

"Where was the wounded man taken?" Astro asked the sergeant."

"To the receiving hospital."

"We'll go over there first, then." And Astro and Valeska made their way to the limousine and ordered the driver to the place.

"But," said Valeska, "how queerly she acted! I'm so disappointed that she didn't recognize me, after all I'd done for her. I don't know what to make of it."

"Don't you see? She has waked up. Yesterday she was quite another person, a dissociated personality. She had no memory, and had even lost the power to talk or write. That is often the case. Owing to some severe mental shock, her normal personality was broken up into parts, so to speak. She had just enough of the functions of her mind synthesized to have volition, and that part-self resembled a crazy person. She had been tortured and starved, no doubt in order to force her to commit this crime, by Soumissin. Somehow she managed to escape from that house, and then her reason left her. You found her what she was, half-witted, with only sense enough to appeal to your protection. She had forgotten everything,—everything, that is, except something concerning the number 13. Now the question is, when did she come to herself and her full rationality? Was it when she got up in your room to leave you—"

"Or was it when she got into the rug store?" Valeska added, with a look of horror in her eyes.

"That's the question. Let's hope that Dyorian is conscious by the time we reach the hospital. Everything depends on that!"

Arrived at the hospital, Astro entered the office and asked for the house physician. A few words only were necessary to explain the palmist's right of inquiry, and his description of the Syrian girl's mental condition was of great professional interest to the doctor. He promised to go to the Tombs and see her as soon as possible. Dyorian, it seemed, lay at the point of death; but, finding how important it was to have the exact time of the shooting determined, the doctor consented to go up to the ward and attempt to revive him sufficiently to answer the question. Astro and Valeska waited for him in the office.

It was fifteen minutes before he returned. "I could just barely make him understand," he said, "but I am sure that he did at last. With almost his last breath he whispered, 'Ten o'clock,' adding that he didn't know who shot him. He died before I left the bedside."

Acting on Astro's hint, McGraw not only succeeded in capturing a half-dozen Turks and Armenians in the Washington Street den, but, exercising the "third degree" in a manner for which he was famous, extorted a confession from one of the prisoners. It was the more easy because the man, who had honestly believed himself to be working for the cause of Armenian freedom, discovered that he had been merely the tool of a band of blackmailers and murderers. He had witnessed the cruel torture of the young Syrian girl; but had been told that she was a Turkish spy who was plotting to betray the Armenian cause to the Sublime Porte.

On hearing her alibi, sworn to by Valeska, the girl was released; but she was ten days under the care of the hospital doctor before her nerves were recovered enough for her to be brought to the studio. She had been told of Valeska's kindness; but could remember nothing that had happened since her mind first began to wander under the effects of pain and starvation. But her intuition recognized her protectress without the aid of reason, and she fell on her knees like a slave at Valeska's feet. She could not speak a word of English; but her eyes were sufficiently eloquent to prove her gratitude. She treated Astro as if he were her lord and master, watching him continually.

After she had told of her wakening to her full reason in Valeska's room, she described the terror that had come over her at the thought of Dyorian. The thirteenth was the day set for his murder. Her tormentors had in vain tried to force her to do the deed; but, when they found she was intractable, they had told her that, whether she did it or not, Dyorian should surely die on the thirteenth. It was with the idea of saving him from his fate that she made more strenuous attempts to escape, and, after her memory had gone, the number 13 still inspired her with terror and dread. Wakening at Valeska's, this thought had been her first, and she dressed quietly and stole out of the house to warn him. She had found the rug merchant already shot, and the horror of the scene had in her weak state again deprived her of reason. She had run from the body—and that was all she could remember until she was restored to consciousness by two policemen. Then, her fear of being accused as the murderess had nearly distraught her wits again.

She looked curiously now at the pictures she had drawn while in the state of abstraction, and identified the sign, the fez, the Turkish flag, and the number 13.

"But what is this one?" Astro asked, pointing to the one drawing he had not identified.

The girl shuddered, and reach for Valeska's hand. When she could speak, she explained to Astro.

"It was awful,—you can't know how awful it was till you have tried it. I was three days strapped to that chair, and on the wall right opposite my head was a mirror. I had to look at myself all day. It grew more and more horrible, till I couldn't stand it. By turning my head I could see the sign, but always my own face was in front of me, staring, staring, staring. It grew hideous, sinister, diabolic. After a while it wasn't I, at all. It was a devil leering at me, and I knew he was inside of me looking through my own eyes. Oh, God!" She paused, and looking up at Valeska said simply, "*She* is lucky. She can look at her face in the glass. I can't ever use a mirror any more. It frightens me."

Astro nodded his head slowly. Then he said, with a faint smile, "Yes, I can fancy no more exquisite torture for a woman to bear."

Then, before he translated the speech to Valeska, he turned to her with a whimsical expression.

"What would you do if you were to be deprived of mirrors of any kind for the rest of your life?"

"I think I'd commit suicide," she replied, blushing.

"There'd be no need for that. I shall always be able to tell you how pretty you are. But now we must cure this little girl. I'm sure that a hypnotic treatment will soon convince her how pretty she is, and she won't be afraid to prove it."

Valeska looked up archly, and added, "Neither shall I!"

THE TROUBLE WITH TULLIVER

"I NOTICE that most of the talk about Tulliver's running for governor has stopped," said Astro, dropping his morning paper and looking over to where Valeska, his assistant, was copying horoscopes from the Master's notes.

"I'm disappointed," she replied. "There seemed to be hope for the regeneration of the city government at last. It is strange how Tulliver has let up on the prosecution of those Brooklyn aldermen, though, isn't it?"

"Strange? How?" Astro gazed at her keenly; but it was perfectly evident that he was confident of his own opinion.

"Why, he began so well and so strenuously; and then, just before the case was to be brought for trial he seems to have dropped the whole thing. It doesn't seem to be like what we know of his character, somehow."

"Do you believe that he's been bribed?" Astro bent his dark brows.

"You never can tell nowadays. But he's such a fighter ordinarily that it looks suspicious. Why, I've heard extraordinary tales of his persistence and his energy. He takes no more sleep than Edison,—he works night and day, and can do usually four times as much work as an ordinary man could in similar circumstances."

Astro nodded his picturesque dark head thoughtfully, and took his customary seat on the divan by his water-pipe. With a toss of his hand he threw his red silken robe about his legs. The moonstone aigret in his oriental turban nodded rhythmically as he thought it over. Finally he said:

"The district attorney has not been bribed, Valeska, I'm sure of that. I have seen him and talked with him. I've studied his hand, his face, his gait, his voice, his gesture. Money can't buy that man. He not only has the energy you speak of, Valeska, he has a tremendous moral force besides. There is no graft in Tulliver. But there's something wrong. This lack of power, just when he ought to strike hardest, is suspicious. It's sinister. I tell you!" he added, rising, as the idea caught and held him with a new force. "This gang of boodlers has got him somehow! It's not a square fight!"

Valeska came up to him, more than commonly moved by his emotion. "Oh!" she exclaimed, taking his hand, "why can't you help him, if there is a plot? I'd like to see you try your hand at something more worth while than mere murders and jewel mysteries. You're wasting your talents on such ordinary detective work. Why not offer your services? Why not take up the fight for him, and with him, if it's possible, and help him win? You'll never have a more worthy cause!"

In her excitement her voice had become vibrant, thrilling with a warm personal note not wholly accounted for by her words. Astro perceived it, glanced at her, turned away suddenly. His voice had changed too, when he said:

"Shall I offer my services?"

"Oh, do!"

"You know that it is not my policy nor my custom to do that."

"It's your duty."

He swung round to her and took both her hands in a strong grip. "If you ask me, Valeska, I'll do it."

And so Astro undertook to discover what was the trouble with Tulliver.

It was a delicate proceeding, at first, and it devolved upon Valeska herself to undertake the initial steps. It was three or four days before she had gone over the ground well enough to select the point of attack; but at the end of that time she had made up her mind that Mrs. Tulliver was in the line of least resistance to her efforts.

It did not take long for Valeska to discover that Mrs. Tulliver had a baby, and that the baby had a nurse, that the two went every fine morning to take the air in Central Park. In two days Valeska was there also with a baby borrowed for the occasion. Valeska waited at the corner of Fifth Avenue and East Sixty-fourth Street, until little Alice Tulliver and her nurse came down the steps of the Tulliver house. After that it was easy to make connections in the park and to happen to sit down on the same bench. To any one who watched Valeska's whimsical charm, and pretty expressive face, a confidential acquaintanceship was inevitable and the most natural thing in the world.

In such wise Valeska soon learned that Tulliver was suffering from what the doctors were pleased to term nervous prostration; that he had been advised to take a rest; and that Mrs. Tulliver was much worried over the situation. Mrs. Tulliver was ambitious and took great interest in her husband's political career. There was an atmosphere of great anxiety in the house on Sixty-fourth Street.

Valeska was a willing and sympathetic listener to the nurse's confidence, and watched her chance for interposition. It came unexpectedly the very next day, when Mrs. Tulliver herself came across the two engaged in conversation on a park bench. There was little need for diplomacy. Valeska's attractive manners produced an immediate effect upon Mrs. Tulliver's emotional, intuitive nature; and seeing with her rare perception that frankness was the quickest and easiest method with her, Valeska boldly told her who she was, and offered her services.

Mrs. Tulliver was too full of her own forebodings not to grasp immediately at this unlooked-for hope in her trouble. She confessed that her suspicions had been aroused, and, though they were not shared by her husband, she was convinced that the gang of boodling aldermen, desperate at the prospect of conviction, were making underhanded attacks upon their chief enemy, the district attorney. They were not of a sort to stop at any crime that would rid them of his strenuous prosecution.

Of Astro's fame as Master of Mysteries, Mrs. Tulliver had heard, and she willingly consented to lay the matter before him. His name was already known at the district attorney's office through the many crimes that, in unofficial cooperation with the police, he had pursued and solved.

Her story, after reaching the studio, amply confirmed Astro's suspicions. Tulliver had, the week before the date set for the opening of the trial, worked hard night and day over the data. His material was complex and voluminous; it required all his energy to select the proper points of testimony, to arrange his plan of prosecution, and to divide the work to be done by his assistants. All had gone well till Saturday. He had worked at his office till noon, and then had gone to a barber shop in the vicinity of City Hall Square and been shaved and manicured. That night he had intended going to the house of a friend for an evening's entertainment and relaxation, before beginning on the arduous final preparations for the trial. These last important investigations he had put off till Sunday, thinking that the recreation on Saturday night would help him to devote his whole energy to the case.

On Saturday night he showed extreme lassitude and manifested an unwillingness to go out with his wife. She had induced him to attend the entertainment, however; but, his fatigue increasing, they had both returned early and retired. On Sunday he slept late. He was worried about the case; but felt almost unable to rise and go to work. He had, after breakfast, dragged himself to his study and shut himself up with his papers. There Mrs. Tulliver had found him fast asleep at dinner-time. He made a second attempt to go about his work in the afternoon, and fell asleep a second time, showing extreme exhaustion. At nine o'clock he roused himself sufficiently to ask his wife to telephone to the judge of the court to postpone the case, and to notify his assistants of the necessary delay.

A doctor called on Monday against Tulliver's wishes and diagnosed his lassitude as nervous prostration. He had prescribed a remedy, and after taking it Tulliver had gradually recovered his customary state of health and energy. This attack of exhaustion, however, coming just before an important phase of the case was reached, and the rumors of bribery in connection with the district attorney, which had already been voiced in some of the city papers, had affected him as deeply as they had disturbed Mrs. Tulliver. He showed no disinclination whatever to drop the case; in fact he was more ardent than ever in wishing to bring the boodlers to justice. But already his delays and apparent lack of interest had seriously damaged his political career in the minds of the people.

Astro listened to all this attentively, with only an occasional question. A pretty woman at all times, with a proud, spiritedly-poised head and soft dark eyes, Mrs. Tulliver's distress made her beauty pathetic. It was plainly evident that, much as she was moved by the fear of her husband's illness and the sacrifice of his political future, what affected her still more strongly was the fear of some stain on his reputation; and, perhaps, in the dim shadows of her mind, unacknowledged, but sinisterly insistent, was the specter of a doubt of his probity. She knew well enough the cunning and the ingratiating methods of political corruption, and though she would not admit even to herself that her husband was venal, the horror of this potent secret force prostrated her.

It was Astro himself who gave her back her courage and her faith. She regained her strength at his offers of assistance. As he spoke, slowly, gently, commandingly, as she watched his handsome, mysteriously sentient face, some of his secret power went from him to her. The very strangeness of that face, with its oriental calm, with its oriental wisdom, with its beatific sympathy, gave her trust. She sat, so, watching him, one hand in Valeska's hand, till he had finished.

One question, however, before she left, he put in a way to renew her alarm. "Who is your cook?" he asked.

"Why, we've had her only about nine months; but she came recommended highly. Do you think—"

"Can you see to it that all his food is prepared under your personal supervision, or that he takes his lunches only at large, well-known restaurants?"

She thought she could do both.

"Be careful, then," he said. "And, for the last thing, find out all his movements in what detail you can, both in the past and in the future. Telephone me every day what he intends to do. And, by the way, what is the date set for the opening of the trial?"

"Next Monday."

"Then we haven't much time. But we'll win!"

As she left the great studio Valeska accompanied her to the outer door. Here she paused and clutched the girl's hand. "What did he mean about the cook?" she demanded. "Does he think it can be as bad as that,—that they would try poison?"

"Oh, he's only anxious to take all the precautions possible."

"Then I shall have to tell my husband I have been here."

"As you please," said Valeska. "Only be sure that you have the most powerful defender in New York. Astro has never failed yet."

She returned to the studio, to find Astro already absorbed in a medical book. He had taken down a bound volume of *The Lancet,* and pointed to it. "Look that over carefully and see if you can find that article on the *Pathology of Fatigue.* I can't recall what year it came out; but it was the report of the experiments of an Austrian, I think."

She looked at him in surprise. "You have a theory already?"

"No, not quite; but there is a disturbance in my memory,—there's something I can't quite place, or account for; if I don't try too hard, it will float up unconsciously. That's why I want you to look it up. But our line of investigation is plain."

"The barber?"

"Or the manicure. I didn't dare ask about that. I don't want Tulliver to suspect. Of course she'll tell him everything; I can see that, I expected it. But I must get to that particular barber shop to-day and begin to watch."

"Is it poison, then?"

"Undoubtedly poison; but whether physical or moral I don't yet know."

"But you seemed to be so sure of his honesty."

"I knew she would tell him everything. It was the only way. There is always the chance of corruption. Dishonesty is as much a disease as cholera. One can become infected by it as well as by a germ. I said it was my business to know human nature; but no one can know it, except to be sure that it's liable to all sorts of dangers and diseases. No one is immune. We can only fight infection of all sorts. If this man Tulliver is being poisoned, I'll find out how and by whom, and I'll save him. If he is being corrupted morally, is there any less reason why I should help him? It may be the first time in his life—and the last. I know only that I like him, I admire his wife, and if I can beat that gang I'll do it! *Selah.* I have spoken."

It was late that afternoon when Astro returned from his investigations. By his look, Valeska knew that he was worried. Mrs. Tulliver had telephoned and said that the district attorney would be at his office all day and would return directly from there. From her tone it was evident that her husband did not take the Seer's assistance so gratefully as she herself did. Astro listened with a frown.

"Well, I'll save him in spite of himself, then. I confess it looks dubious. I saw our old friend, Lieutenant McGraw of the detective force, and he succeeded in finding out for me some of Tulliver's habits. He patronizes a small barber shop on Broadway, opposite the post-office, but doesn't go there regularly. Most often drops in there on Saturdays. I went in and got a shave. There was a tow-headed manicure in a corner, with about ten pounds of bracelets and a Marcel wave of the Eighth-Avenue type, crisp as galvanized iron. I didn't like her, on several counts; I somehow felt wrong with her. I had my nails attended to, and she was too smooth. She never refuses an invitation to dinner, that girl.

"Now," he continued, "we can't possibly investigate this thing from the Brooklyn end. There are too many in that gang of boodlers for us to follow them all. So we have to trace it back from the district attorney, and find some point of contact with the aldermen. If Tulliver was bought up, he wouldn't have worked so hard up to Saturday noon. He would have taken it easy and put his assistants off. Something must have happened on Saturday, and if anything happened, whether he was doped or bribed, the only place for it to have happened was in that barber shop. It's too bad I can't trail her to-night; but I have a positive appointment with Colonel Mixter. You'll have to shadow the manicure. She leaves the shop at six o'clock; so you must hurry."

With that, he threw himself on his divan, spread a pack of cards in front of him, and began "getting Napoleon out of Saint Helena." It was a habit of his when most puzzled with his strange problems to rest his mind occasionally by a game of solitaire. It was a sort of mental bath from which he rose always refreshed and ready for a new attack of the question in hand.

"Did you find that article in *The Lancet?*" he asked as Valeska was preparing to leave the studio.

"No," was her reply; "but I found a reference to it in an article on the anatomy of the vasomotor nerves. The name was Weichardt, wasn't it?"

"By Jove! that's it!" he cried joyfully. "Weichardt, Weichardt!" he repeated the name to himself. "I'll get it now! I'll just let that boil subconsciously a while."

Valeska took the subway down-town, reaching the barber shop just in time to see, through the basement windows, an orange-haired girl putting on her hat behind a screen in the corner. She nodded to the men at the chairs as she passed and came slowly up the steps to the street, still fingering the terrific pompadour that jutted from her forehead. She walked slowly down Broadway, glancing at her watch once, and loitering occasionally at shop-windows. It was evident that she was a bit too early for some appointment. At the corner of Fulton Street she stopped and waited.

It was a long time before a man, smoking a cigar, came up to her and stopped without lifting his hat. Then he took the girl's arm familiarly, and the two walked to the subway entrance again, descended, and took a Brooklyn train, and got off at the Borough station.

Valeska had meanwhile not only kept on their track, but had secured a seat where she could watch them at close range. The man looked like a political heeler, a barkeeper, or a sport. He might indeed have been all three. The two seemed very friendly; the girl's strident laugh sounded more than once through the car. In Brooklyn they went to a flashy restaurant that was generally frequented by the sporting element. The man ordered dinner and wine. As the meal proceeded, the manicure's laugh grew louder, and she became more familiar. It was not a pleasant sight.

From here the two came out upon the electric-lighted sidewalk, debated for a while at the curb, then got into a street-car. At Waverley Avenue they got out and walked up to number 1321. Here, rather to Valeska's surprise, the girl left the man abruptly, ran up the steps, took out a key, and entered. The man walked slowly back, boarded a car, and rode downtown.

Valeska followed him. She got out with him at Preston Street, and from here her task was more difficult. Keeping at a safe distance, however, she saw him stop at a two-story wooden house. At that moment a man, approaching from the other direction with two dogs held in leash, met him. The two entered the house together, and Valeska approached and reconnoitered. As she passed, she heard the dogs barking, and mingled with the noise was the sound of whining, as of animals in pain. The lower windows were dark; but the three above, on the second floor, were lighted. Creeping softly up the steps, Valeska laid her ear to the keyhole and listened. There was a low but distinct sound,—a rumbling as of wheels turning, wheels with a heavy load, as if some machine were being laboriously worked.

Two days passed, and each night Valeska took up the scent, following the manicure girl across to Brooklyn as before. Both times, however, the girl was alone. The first night she dined alone at a little dairy near the Borough station and went to a vaudeville show afterward. The second night she went directly home. The next day was Saturday.

"We seem to have got nothing yet," she said to Astro that morning. "I confess I'm discouraged. If that man I saw is the go-between he covers his tracks well. If he hands her any drug or money it is impossible for us to detect it. If we could only get into that house on Preston Street!"

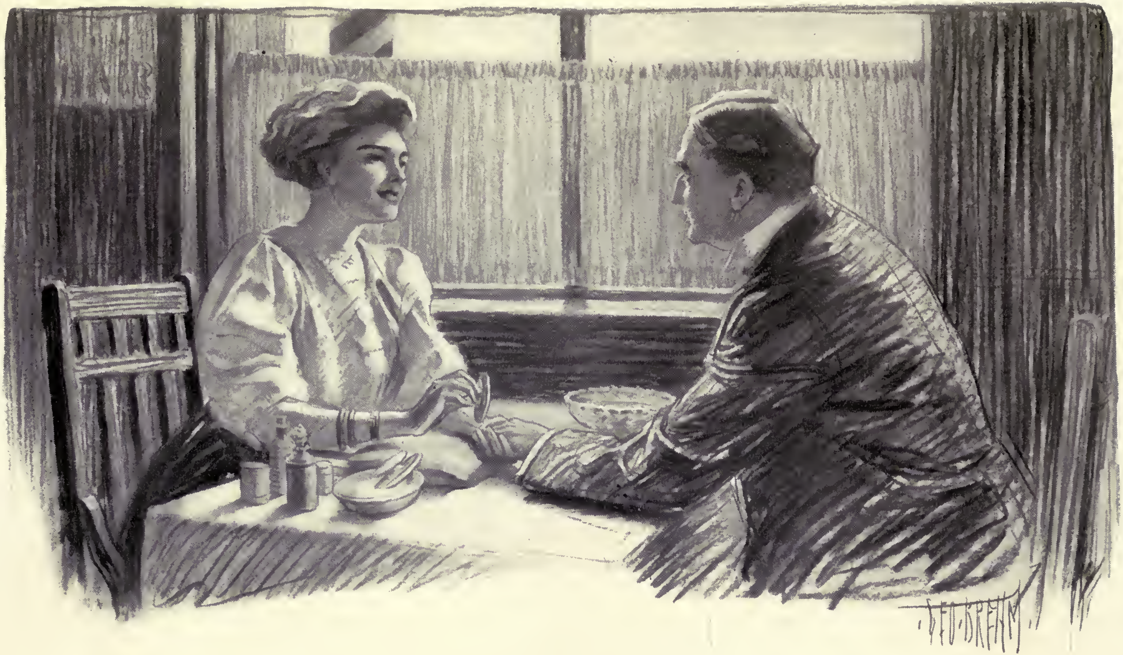
"That's impossible," said Astro; "it's too well guarded. I've been over there to see it. I was looking for a house to rent, you know, and found out enough to arouse my suspicions. The neighbors are gossiping about the place already. Dogs go in; but don't come out. There are moans and howls all night long, and it's getting to be a scandal. But to-day I hope to find out something definite about the relations that exist between Tulliver and that girl. McGraw has agreed to tip me off when Tulliver goes to the shop, and I think I can get a chance to watch the two together."

Nothing had been heard from Mrs. Tulliver in the meantime. To Valeska's mind that in itself was suspicious. Astro's story when he returned did not relieve her mind.

"I got in after Tulliver," he said, "and was shaved, just managing to miss my turn with the manicure lady. Tulliver had his nails polished, as usual. She brightened up considerably at sight of him. It seemed to me that she was excited. He talked and laughed a little with her; but not enough to prove any great intimacy. She was undoubtedly nervous, however. Once she went behind the screen and did something, I don't know what. But she had ample opportunity to convey a secret message to him without arousing the least suspicion. I confess I'm worried about him."

With this, Valeska had to be content for the time, and she heard no more till Monday morning. Then, upon her arrival at the studio, Astro met her with a black face.

"Tulliver is down again!" he said immediately. "Mrs. Tulliver telephoned yesterday at ten o'clock in the morning, while her husband was asleep. He abso-



She had ample opportunity to convey a secret message to him.

lutely refused to work, said he was exhausted, and insisted on taking a nap. He said he wasn't ill at all, only felt tired. It was plain enough that she is fearfully worried now, and will help us out with information whether he objects or not. You had better go and see her and get all the details."

Valeska lost no time in obeying him. Astro threw himself on the divan, refused all comers, and gave himself up to a struggle with his problem. Something in his memory balked. He was usually wonderfully in control of it, and the refusal tantalized him.

Valeska returned at eleven o'clock and reported that Tulliver had gone down to the office, though still listless and blue. Mrs. Tulliver's alarm had increased, and she was now willing to tell all she knew.

"I spoke to her as delicately as I could about the manicure girl," she said. "Mrs. Tulliver seemed a bit worried at the subject. She said that Tulliver had often spoken of her as an original slangy type, whose conversation refreshed him after his hard work. In fact, that was his chief reason for having his nails done there,—so that he could listen to the girl's persiflage, to which he didn't even have to answer. That seemed to be her main talent, in fact; for Mrs. Tulliver said that she had a gift of gab, rather striking looks, and the ability to create a high and showy polish on men's nails. She is clumsy, though. She has managed her scissors so unskilfully that she has cut Mr. Tulliver's fingers twice."

Astro jumped to his feet. "Abracadabra!" he exclaimed, and stood staring at Valeska.

"What's the matter?"

"We're getting on!" He started to walk up and down. "Let me think it over again. I believe I've almost got it. Leave me alone here, and I'll do some deep-sea diving in the abysses of my memory, if you'll pardon the metaphor. You look over the papers while I grope in the recesses."

Valeska left and took up the file of morning papers. She was not gone long, having found something almost immediately that seemed important enough to warrant her interrupting the Master of Mysteries.

"What do you think?" she exclaimed, appearing between the velvet portières that screened the palmist's vast studio from the reception-room. "That house at number 1321 Preston Street has been raided by the police, at the instigation of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. They entered the place yesterday, and found a sort of treadmill where two dogs were working themselves almost to death, for no apparent reason whatever. There was a bed, a table, and chemical things in one of the rooms of the lower floor; but there was nothing up-stairs but the dogs, the treadmill, and a table that looked as if it had been used for dissection."

Astro had stood listening to every word. As Valeska spoke, his face cleared. A smile appeared on his lips. He threw off his crimson silk robe, tossed his turban into a corner, and on the instant appeared as the virile keen man of activity.

"I have it!" he exclaimed. "It is all over! District Attorney Tulliver will have no more mysterious attacks of fatigue! The boodling Brooklyn aldermen will be prosecuted from now on with all despatch!"

He went up to Valeska, and gently led her to a seat, laughing at the wonder in her eyes.

"Listen," he said. "I had it all deep in my memory; but until this moment I couldn't make connections with it and apply my knowledge to this case. Now I recall everything. Herr Weichardt, a Munich pathologist, some years ago made some experiments which showed that fatigue was an actual pathological condition. In other words, he proved it was a disease, by discovering the germ and inoculating living organisms with it. He took some animals,—pigs, if I recall aright,—made them work till they were almost dead of fatigue, then removed the tired muscles and extracted the serum from them. With this he inoculated other animals. He found that a small dose of his serum culture caused all the characteristic symptoms of fatigue in the patient and that a heavy dose produced even death."

"But how could this gang administer such a poison?"

"Through the manicure, whom they had engaged and paid, of course. All she had to do, after she had received the serum from the man you saw, was to dip her nail scissors into the solution, and then clip the cuticle so as to draw blood. The merest scratch would suffice, and no noticeable sore in the finger would be caused; but the toxic germs would permeate the veins and be distributed all over the body. It was the fact that she had cut Tulliver's finger that aroused my memory; then the story of the treadmill instantly suggested Weichardt's experiments. It was a devilishly subtle plot. You see, they didn't dare actually to poison him, or give him any easily recognized disease. All they needed was to put him out of business for a day or so at critical moments when they needed time to prepare their fight."

"Then you'll tell Tulliver?"

"Certainly. With the police behind him, he can easily run down the plot and do what he wishes about it. Most likely he'll see that the manicure girl leaves town, and let the rest go."

Valeska looked thoughtfully at the huge crystal ball on an ebony table in front of her and spoke as if to herself. "I wish some other symptoms besides fatigue could be transmitted in that way. One might infuse some of the district attorney's own strenuosity and honesty, for instance, into persons who need moral stamina."

"I can think of better things than that to do." Astro gazed dreamily at the pretty flushed face in front of him. His eyes lingered on the fair curling hair, the lovely curve of the neck, the slenderly graceful, girlish hands, the sensitive mouth, the cunningly molded figure, and he sighed.

"What would you try to give me, if you were undertaking the experiment?" Valeska asked without looking up.

Astro did not answer. Instead he took one more long tender look at her. "I think," he said finally, "that first I shall have to treat myself!"

WHY MRS. BURBANK RAN AWAY

"SURELY," said Astro, "until you have solved a woman's emotional equation, there's little use in trying to discover her motive. A woman will kill a man she hates; but she will as often kill a man she loves. Now look at this letter and tell me whether the writer is in love or not." As he spoke, he selected a sheet from the many spread out on his table and handed it to his assistant. Then, taking up the stem of his narghile, he leaned comfortably back on his velvet couch and watched the girl with amusement and fondness. His oriental eyes narrowed, and his olive-skinned, handsome, oval face under the white turban became a mask.

Valeska took up the writing with a pretty gesture and scanned it studiously. She looked up at last with a quick interrogative smile. "She's in love, I think; isn't she?"

"Decidedly!" The Master of Mysteries bowed slowly. "The crossings of the "t's" are almost all in a double curve; it's a sure sign. But you notice that some of them have only a single curve, like the lower arc of a circle."

"Oh, so they have! Why, then, she has had a previous love-affair, hasn't she?"

"Yes. She is sincerely in love now; though she hasn't yet forgotten her first. You see by the regularity of her terminals, too, that she's a faithful friend. But to return to the crossings: let us compare these with some others."

He looked over the collection and drew forth another specimen. "Here you see a woman that has had but one affair, and has quite outlived it. The arc is that of the top of a circle, you see. Here's one who is beginning to be in love. You will observe the same arc as in the first,—a rising curve, but no compound curves. If you thoroughly understand this principle, we'll go on to a study of terminals and gladiated words." As he spoke his face lighted up with enthusiasm.

A bell, softly tinkling, interrupted him. With a sudden gesture he swept all the letters into a heap and tossed them into a drawer. That done, he became again the calm impassive Seer. He drew his red silken robe about him as Valeska rose to answer the bell. He followed her svelt graceful form with alert eyes till she disappeared in the waiting-room; then they fell abstractedly on the slow, gracefully-rising, blue, perfumed smoke of the censer in a corner of the dim studio and remained there until the curtains again parted.

The visitor was a fine military type of man, with white mustache and iron-gray hair, tall and well-built, but with a face drawn and haggard. He strode up to Astro with a determined air. The Seer awaited the first words calmly.

"My name is Burbank," the man began,—"Major Burbank, retired. I have come to you on an important and delicate piece of business, at the advice of a friend who has told me of your reputation for solving mysteries. I trust, sir, that you will consider what I have to say to you as confidential?"

Astro nodded and made an expressive gesture.

"My wife left our home yesterday afternoon, leaving a very painful letter for me. I wish to know, sir, if you think that you can discover her whereabouts for me without precipitating a scandal. I have the greatest wish that this matter should not be known unless it is absolutely necessary."

Astro bowed and pointed to a chair, seating himself as well. "I am ready, sir," he replied. "If you will acquaint me with the details, I think I can do what you wish."

"There are no details," the visitor broke out; "that is, none but this letter. Everything was all right; we were happily married; my wife and I loved each other. We have two children, whom she has abandoned. It's incredible, sir! There is absolutely no reason for it at all, so far as I can see. But look at this, and imagine what I have to suffer!"

He took a letter in an envelope from his pocket and handed it to the Seer.

Astro looked over the envelope carefully then opened the letter and read the following message:

> "MY DEAR, DEAR GEORGE—I shall never see you again. Don't try to find me. I'm going to finish a long bitter wretchedness. Forgive me if you can; for I have suffered. Farewell. ELLEN."

His eyes ran over the pen strokes carefully. He looked at the back of the envelope again, then held it sensitively in his hands, keeping a serious silence for a few minutes. His gaze became abstracted. For several minutes he did not speak, seemingly falling into a deep reverie. Then he said:

"My dear sir, your wife is still alive, and I think I can find her. But I get from the radiations of this writing a conviction that she is in great mental distress which it is not well for you to break in upon just yet. I should prefer that you permit me to inspect your house and see if I can not discover the reason for this surprising action. By visiting the place where she was last, I shall the more readily be impressed by her magnetism and get the vibrations that have undoubtedly affected her. First of all, I must ask you to send me immediately several photographs of Mrs. Burbank, that I may fix her image in my mind."

Major Burbank had stood looking at him with a tense anxious look. "Is that necessary?" he said, "I had hoped that, if you had the occult power you claim, you could do it more simply."

"If you wish to help her—" Astro shrugged his shoulders.

"Help her! It's just that!" he exclaimed. "I want to save her, even more than I want to find her."

"That goes without saying. Very well. Only a few more questions, so that I may be prepared for whatever influences I may find. Who lives in your house?" He added, "Including servants, of course."

"Besides my wife and myself, only the cook, a second girl, and a nurse."

"Who are your most frequent visitors?"

"Why, let's see. Ellen has a lot of women friends who run in occasionally, of course."

"No, the men."

The major looked at him sternly. "See here, sir! If you attempt for a moment to hint that—"

"My dear Major Burbank," Astro replied amiably, "I hint at nothing. All I wish is to be able to distinguish between the astral emanations of those who frequent your place. It is possible that Mrs. Burbank was most affected by a woman; but it is not likely."

The major, still frowning, replied: "We lead a very quiet life. My friend Colonel Trevellian is the only close friend of the family. But I must tell you, sir, that my wife has of late confessed to me that she did not like him. It has made it very uncomfortable for me, I assure you. But I saw him only to-day. He can have nothing to do with this disappearance, I'm sure. I have known him for several years quite intimately, and he's the last person—"

"I understand," said Astro dryly; "but has he heard of Mrs. Burbank's disappearance?"

"No, I haven't had the heart to tell him."

"Very good. I should advise you not to. Well, I will call this afternoon. I think we shall be able to satisfy you."

As soon as the visitor had gone, Valeska appeared. Astro handed her Mrs. Burbank's letter, with a curious look. She examined it under the drop-light at the table.

"She is in love; but has had a previous affair, just like that other woman. How curious! And she's suffering from a severe mental strain, too. I heard the major's conversation while I was in the secret closet. It's interesting, isn't it? Do you suppose she has outgrown her feeling for her husband and is in love with his friend now?"

"Or is she in love with her husband and has outgrown her affection for Colonel Trevellian—that's what we have to find out." Astro shook his head.

"You said you knew she was alive, though. How can you be sure that is true?"

"You haven't half examined that envelope," Astro replied abstractedly, as he walked up and down, his chin in his hand, supporting the elbow with his other arm, absorbed in thought.

"It's postmarked New York, though— Oh, I see!" Valeska smiled at him. She had turned back the top flap, which adhered, loosely gummed, and looked at the imprint of the stationer. "Hodge & Durland, Poughkeepsie, N. Y." she read. "She may be there, perhaps. But how did she mail it here in New York?"

"No doubt she gave a porter a dollar at the station to post it when his train got into the city. Perfectly simple. You'll notice that the envelope is badly crumpled and soiled. It has evidently been carried some time in a man's pocket.

"Now," he continued, taking off his robe and turban, "I wish to lose no time; so I'll go right over to the Burbanks', while you wait for the photographs. As soon as they come, take the first train for Poughkeepsie, and see if you can locate Mrs. Burbank. It's unlikely she is still there; yet she may be."

"And if I find her?"

"Keep her in sight, wire me, and await instructions."

"I see." Valeska bent her brows in thought. "If she's gone, of course I'll try to trace her, if I can get it out of the hotel clerks."

"If you can?" Astro, struggling into a long gray overcoat, paused long enough to smile at his assistant.

In return she made a mischievous face at him. He blew a kiss to her, and taking his stick and silk hat, left the studio.

His green limousine took him in ten minutes to a brownstone house on West Fifty-second Street, one of a row of gloomily respectable fronts. A butler, impressively solemn, ushered him into the parlor.

Astro was about to sit down when the man said:

"I'm sorry to say that Major Burbank has been unexpectedly called away, sir, and left instructions that you should see anything you wished." His voice dropped in tone as he added somberly, "The fact is, sir, the major had just heard a piece of shocking news. His brother has just committed suicide, sir, and he has gone up to Kingsbridge to see about it, sir. He was very much upset, of course, sir; but he told me to do what was necessary for you. So if you are ready I'll show you everything."

"Is Mrs. Burbank in?" Astro asked.

"No, sir, she is not. I understand an aunt was taken ill and she has gone out of town to attend to her. She left yesterday afternoon, sir, directly after lunch, in a great hurry, sir."

"In a hurry?" Astro repeated, watching the impassive countenance of the servant.

"Yes, sir; so much so that she never stopped to hang up the telephone receiver, sir. I expect the call was from her aunt's people, though she got a letter in the morning that did seem to upset her, too."

"Ah!" The Master of Mysteries knitted his brow, and sat for a few moments without speaking, while the butler stood erect, waiting like a lay figure. Astro looked up at him suddenly, with a keen searching gaze, and for a moment a startled expression passed over the man's face.

"So Mrs. Burbank has gone to her aunt's?" he said deliberately.

"That's what she said, sir."

"Do you believe it?"

The butler shifted his feet uneasily. "It's hardly for me to say, sir."

"See here!" Astro rose and took the fellow by the lapel of his coat. "You're quite right, my man. It isn't for you to suspect anything, of course. But if I know anything about human nature, you are devoted to the major, and you're to be trusted. Now see here! I'm here to help him in this matter; but anything I find out from you shall go no further. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir," the butler replied uneasily. "The major said I was to obey your instructions to the letter, sir."

"There is one thing that I want to know, my man, and that is, did Mrs. Burbank write to Colonel Trevellian before or since she went away?"

"I can't say, sir, as to that."

The Seer still looked at the man searchingly, as if sending his will and thought through his eyes to fascinate and charm. The man's attitude, as he watched Astro, changed subtly from suspicion to confidence. Gradually he lost the conventional stolidity of the servant and became more human.

"All I want to see is the envelope of that letter," Astro said, watching his man.

The butler hesitated. "I might possibly find out from the colonel's man, sir. I'm well acquainted with him, and I've done him favors in times past."

"See if you can get it; and meanwhile I'll go up into Mrs. Burbank's room."

The butler showed the way up-stairs and left the Master of Mysteries alone. Once the door was shut, Astro gave a swift look about the chamber, then walked to a writing-desk. Everything was in order, and not a letter was visible. From here he turned to the open grate. The fire was out, and only a few ashes remained. These he examined carefully. On the top were a few flakes of carbonized paper, crumpled like black poppy petals. With a deft finger he drew these from the grate and carried them to the desk, placing them on a white blotter. On the wrinkled surface, almost invisible, were some traces of writing, appearing as if slightly embossed on the surface. He could make out only one word, or part of a word: "Kellem." The closest scrutiny revealed no more writing; but on one charred fragment he discovered the remains of a postage-stamp. It was curiously shrunk to half-size, and appeared as a negative, in which all that had been white was black, and the red ink changed to gray.

By the time he had accomplished this delicate manipulation, the butler had returned.

"I found the letter, sir; but it hasn't been opened at all. It seems that the colonel didn't come home last night, and hasn't returned yet. I got it out of William; but he's in a mortal terror, sir, and he wants me to bring it back at once. Do you think it will take you long, sir?"

"About ten minutes; but I shall have to be alone."

"You're not going to open it, sir! It's as much as William's place is worth to be caught at this game."

"No, I won't open it. I only wish to see the writing. Come back in ten minutes, and I'll let you have it back."

As soon as the butler had gone Astro drew from his pocket a bottle of alcohol and a velvet sponge. With this he moistened the envelope, and it became as transparent as tracing-paper. The letter inside was so folded, however, that he could read only one line, in a nervous, hurried handwriting which he recognized as Mrs. Burbank's:

> "I can not bear it any longer. If you don't—"

He opened the window, set the envelope in a draft, and waited. In ten minutes he took it up, smelled of it, and went out of the room. The butler was anxiously waiting, and received it with relief.

"One moment, before you go," said Astro. "I'd like to see the nursery and the children."

The butler led the way and opened a door on the third floor. Two children, one about four and the other two years old, were playing on the floor with building blocks, while a nursemaid was busy at the window with some sewing. The butler retired to return the letter.

Astro went to the children and knelt down beside them, showing by his manner that he was not only fond of children but used to them. He did not speak at first, sitting with them, smiling, and playing with the blocks as if he himself was of their age. The elder, a boy, seeing him arranging a pile of blocks, crawled over to watch and help him. As the two sat there together, the other baby stared at Astro. Then she put out her two arms and cried:

"Kellem! Kellem!"

Astro stared in surprise. It was the same word, evidently, that he had found on the ashes of Mrs. Burbank's letter. He turned to the nurse, who apparently had noticed nothing unusual.

"What does she mean by that?" he asked.

"Oh, that 'Kellem, kellem'? Why, I don't know, I'm sure, sir. I fancy it's one of the games they play with Colonel Trevellian. He often comes in here for a romp with the kiddies, and they seem to be fond of him. I've heard Agatha say that before; but, lord! I never thought to wonder about it. It is funny, isn't it?"

Again the child reached out her arms and repeated the words, "Kellem, kellem!"

"Did she ever play that particular game with her mother, nurse?"

"I don't remember, sir, I'm sure. I expect so, though. Seems to me, now I think of it, I did hear Mrs. Burbank trying to break Agatha of it; but no doubt I've got it mixed up."

Astro watched the children for some time; then, after kissing each of the chubby faces, went thoughtfully down-stairs.

He had no sooner reached the hall than the outer door opened, and Burbank entered with a serious expression on his face. He bowed and shook his head sadly.

"My misfortunes are all coming at once, it seems," he said. "My brother is dead, my wife missing. It's too much for me, and I'm afraid I'll have to call in the police and put them on the case. I can't stand it any longer; unless—unless you have discovered some way of helping me," he added.

"When did your brother die?" Astro asked.

"As far as we can learn, early this morning. The gas was turned on in his room, and he was found at eight o'clock, dead from the fumes. They were unable to locate me till four this afternoon, when I went right over and did what was necessary."

"He lived alone, I presume?"

"Yes, not even a servant. The body was discovered by a friend whom he had asked to call, who smelled the gas and had the door broken in. I can't account for it any way."

"Did Mrs. Burbank ever visit his apartment?" Astro asked.

"Yes. Occasionally when he was ill, she went over and took him things necessary." He stopped and stared at the Master. "But you don't suspect that—that there's any connection between Mrs. Burbank's disappearance and my brother's death?"

"I should like to investigate your brother's apartments," said Astro evasively. "I may be able to receive some impression there that will lead me on the track. I have succeeded in harmonizing the vibrations in Mrs. Burbank's apartments, and feel already that I understand her mental condition when she left home. But there is a strange discord there, Mr. Burbank, and I must complete the impression."

"Here is my card, then. I'll write a note asking that you be given the fullest opportunity for investigation on the premises. Of course the body has been taken to the morgue, and the police are in charge of the apartment; but I think you will have no trouble with them."

"One more thing, Mr. Burbank. I'd like to know if

Mrs. Burbank was ever hypnotized, that you know of."

"Why, only once, possibly twice, at an evening party here. We did have some rather amusing experiments this fall; but it was nothing but fun, of course."

"And who was it that hypnotized her that time?" asked the Seer.

"Why, my friend Colonel Trevellian. He fancied that he had some power, and did succeed in influencing one or two of the company, my wife included. But nothing further ever came of it, and we never tried it again."

"Has the colonel known your wife long?"

"Yes, since before we were married. But, my dear sir, you don't—"

"Mr. Burbank, at present I am merely holding myself sensitive to whatever influences I come in contact with, that's all. As soon as I have soaked myself in them, so to speak, I shall go into a trance and be guided by subconscious mind. I don't know about these things at all. I observe, I listen, I smell; but what works these impressions out in me is deeper than mere sense or mere ratiocination. You must wait patiently, and hope for the best."

He left Burbank disconsolate in the library, and jumping into his limousine, the Master of Mysteries drove to the studio. Here a telegram awaited him. It was from Valeska:

> "She is in Troy. Shall find her this evening and wire address."

He despatched an answer, and hurrying to the subway, took an express to Kingsbridge.

On the way his face belied the confident patter by which he had imposed upon his client. His eyes were fixed, his mouth set. Occasionally he drew from his pocket a note-book and consulted its contents, staring at the page for minutes at a time. As the train slowed down, he became alert again, and when it stopped he waited only long enough to ask for directions, then walked briskly to Burbank's apartment.

The note insured a grudging admittance, and he was taken up-stairs by an officer into a little flat. The place was meagerly furnished as a bachelor's quarters. A look into the kitchen revealed a few utensils and packages of food strewn about in a disorderly manner. The sitting-room was scantily furnished, but in better order. Astro gave it a glance. The chamber where Burbank had died next engrossed his attention. Here he spent a half-hour in elaborate scrutiny. Still he appeared dissatisfied. Excusing himself to the officer, he opened the back door and inspected the platform. Here he saw an ash barrel and a can for refuse. He opened the cover of each in turn. Lighting a match, he looked eagerly into them.

In a moment he had drawn out a broken, hollow, black-rubber cylinder, and after assuring himself that he had all the fragments, slipped them into his overcoat pocket. He then returned inside.

"You have no doubt that the death was caused by suicide, I suppose, officer?"

"Of course not. There's no evidence to the contrary that I know of."

"No one was known to have visited him the night before he died?"

"The people down-stairs say they heard footsteps late that night; but it may have been anybody. Nobody heard the door shut. Or if they had, how was it possible to turn on the gas? The door was locked on the inside, as they found when they burst it in."

"And the rear entrance was locked, too?"

"That, too. It was a suicide, all right."

"Of course. Very well, then, that's all. I'll report to the major. Good night, Officer."

Astro hurried back to the subway station. As he reached the ticket taker he drew a photograph from his pocket and handed it to the man.

"Did you see a woman like this last night, late?"

He looked at it for some time before he answered. "I wouldn't be sure about that; but I've certainly seen her several times. I can't recall just when was the last time."

"That's all," said Astro, and he handed the man a dollar, ran down-stairs, and boarded the express for down-town.

Another telegram from Valeska was lying under his door when he reached the studio. After reading it, he hastily scribbled two despatches and rang for a messenger. One read:

> "Your child Bobby has been taken ill with pneumonia and is at a private hospital, at number 234 West Thirty-fourth Street. Come at once. Important."

This was addressed to Mrs. Belle Grant, Delmar House, Troy, New York. The other was sent to Valeska Wynne.

> "Follow B. G. wherever she goes, and get acquainted with her if possible but do not let her know you know her."

Then, yawning, he took off his coat, rolled up his shirt-sleeves, and sat down to a table under the electric light. Here he laid out the pieces of the cylinder he had found, and with liquid glue started laboriously to piece them together. One by one he fastened them and warmed them over a Bunsen burner till they were dry. The work was long and arduous, and it was almost daylight before he had finished the job. The cylinder was now complete, except for an irregularly shaped hole at one extremity. With a penknife he trimmed the protruding glue, and then examined the whole through a magnifying-glass. Not till it appeared to satisfy his inspection did he desist. But at last the thing was done, and without undressing he threw himself on the great velvet couch under a trophy of arms and fell sound asleep.

His pet cat Deodar, a handsome black Angora, awakened him at nine o'clock by clawing at his sleeve, and Astro jumped up and went to the telephone. A half-hour later, tubbed, and clad in his flowing red silk robe, his turban and its moonstone clasp on his head, he sipped his thick black coffee and munched his rolls as he read in the morning paper the accounts of the suicide of Edward Burbank. Nothing new to interest him had transpired.

As he sat there the bell rang, and soon a boy in buttons entered, carrying a parcel. Astro opened it, and took from a box a phonograph, which he set on the table. He was a bit excited now, as he fitted his mended cylinder to the drum and started the clockwork.

The wheels whirred; a harsh dry voice announced a song by a well-known comedian. After a preliminary orchestral flourish, the solo began. Astro listened eagerly. The melody was constantly interrupted by discordant explosive noises caused by the joining of the broken pieces; but with these interruptions the song ran on for a while fairly intelligibly. Then there was a splitting series of crackling noises. From the silence following these there came a sudden, loud, monotonous exclamation, "Kellem, kellem, kellem, kell—"

Astro, staring, stopped the machine and reseated himself, to fall into a profound reverie. At times he shook his head. Once he rose to take Mrs. Burbank's letter from a pigeonhole, and scrutinized it long and carefully. At last, with a shrug, he took up his narghile and a volume of French memoirs. Smoking and reading, the time passed away till ten o'clock.

The first visitors were sent away by Buttons. Astro would not be disturbed. At eleven, the telephone bell rang. The Master of Mysteries took up the receiver eagerly.

It was Major Burbank. "I have just received a letter," he said, "and I thought it would be well for you to know the contents. It is from my unfortunate brother Edward, and in it he tells me that he is contemplating suicide. The poor fellow was in ill health and financial straits, and the fact that he had been a care to me seemed to worry him. It's dreadful to think of his having been distressed over the little I was able to do for him; but I feel quite sure that he was not sane when he committed his desperate act. The poor fellow is at rest in peace now, I trust. I almost wish I were."

Astro's expression had changed wonderfully as he heard the news. He hastened to offer his sympathy anew to his client, and assured him that it was only a question of a few hours before his wife would return. This promise seemed to quiet the old man's distress. Astro went back into the studio with a new expression, at once determined and jubilant. He sat down, wrote a note, and despatched it by a messenger boy. This done, he set the phonograph carefully at the beginning of the strange exclamation that interrupted the song on the record, and waited.

In a half-hour Buttons opened the heavy portières, announced "Colonel Trevellian!" and a man walked in.

The visitor looked about scornfully. He was a lean, yellow, bony-faced man, with deep-set eyes and a drooping mustache. He spoke with a drawl. "I believe you requested to see me on a matter of importance and of a confidential nature," he observed languidly.

"I did," Astro replied. "I am about to make a request of you."

"Indeed, you do me a great honor." The man's tone was sarcastic.

Astro scarcely looked at him. "I should be infinitely obliged to you, Colonel Trevellian, if you would consent to pack up your things, leave New York and not return for five years."

The colonel scowled, took a step nearer, and clenched his fist. "You infernal charlatan! if you'll take off that nightgown and sweeping-cap, I'll see that you don't decorate this cozy corner any longer! What the deuce do you mean? By Jove! I'll thrash you and pitch you out of your own window!"

Astro yawned. Then he brought his two hands down on his knees, and his dark alert head was outstretched toward the colonel, on whom he turned two blazing eyes. "Colonel Trevellian," he said in a voice like the rattling of paper, "you have persecuted Mrs. Burbank long enough! If you fancy you understand the art of hypnotic suggestion, I can show you that you're a fool as well as a cur. For her sake I consent to permit you to leave town without informing the major exactly what kind of a cad you are, but you'll have to leave quickly."

The colonel had already lost the most of his nerve; but he made a last attempt to bluster. "What do you mean, sir? I've done nothing at all, I assure you. You're quite mistaken. Why, the major is my best friend!"

"And do you not wish to supplant him as husband of your old sweetheart, Mrs. Burbank?"

"Of course not. It's absurd." The colonel's face was ashen now.

"And you did not suggest, after hypnotizing her and getting her somewhat under your influence, that she—"

The man stared hard at Astro, and his jaw had dropped. "That she—what?" He almost whispered it.

Astro touched the phonograph. "Kellem, kellem, kell—" it ground out raucously.

The colonel stared first at the mechanism, then at the palmist. He dropped a step back, undecided, then, turning suddenly, bolted out of the room.

Astro dropped again into his chair, folded his arms, and drew a long breath.

The hansom drew up at number 234. A woman got out, paid the driver, and looked curiously at the front door. Apparently puzzled, she drew a telegram from her purse and read it over. She was a fine-looking woman of thirty-five, dressed all in black, even to her furs, though she wore no mourning veil. Her only luggage was a small traveling bag. Everything about her stamped her as a woman of culture and influence, if not rich, at least comfortably off. Yet her demeanor was timid, almost frightened.

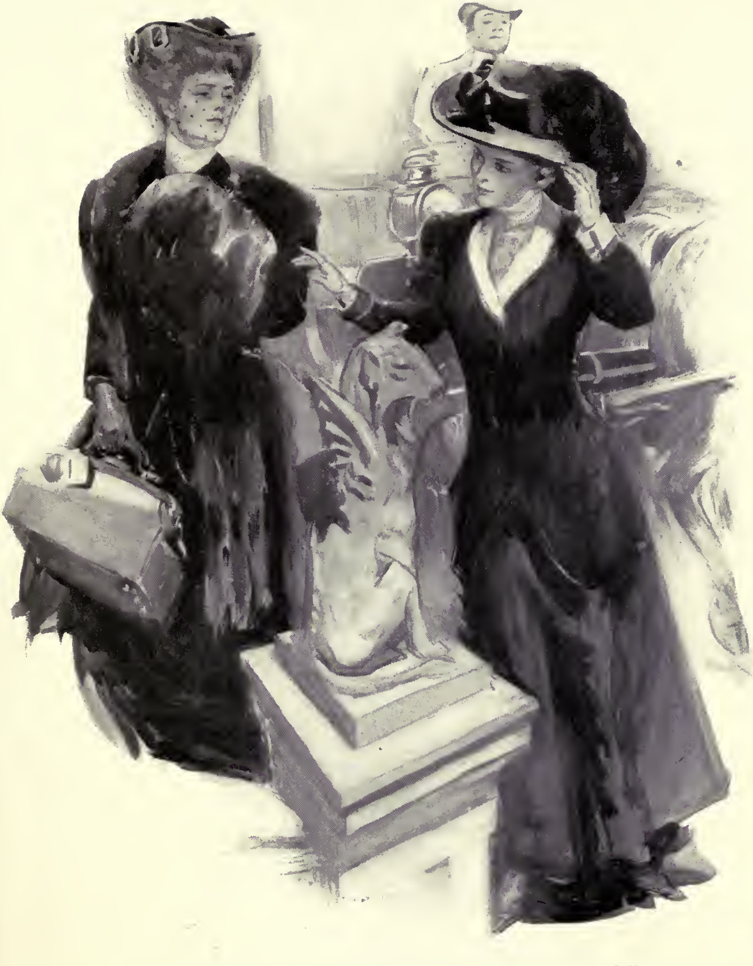
As she started to ascend the steps, a green motor-car, driving furiously, came down Thirty-fourth Street and drew up suddenly before her. A young girl, fresh and pretty, smartly dressed, and with an air of jaunty confidence, jumped out.

The woman who had first arrived stared at her in astonishment. "Why," she said, "how do *you* happen to be here?" The look of perplexity and timidity in her eyes deepened now into positive alarm. "Oh!" she breathed, "you're not a detective?"

Valeska took her hand affectionately. "No, my dear Mrs. Burbank, only a friend who wants to help you. I knew that if I told you on the train you'd never come here; so I didn't dare to explain that we had really imposed upon you. Bobby is quite well, I assure you. You needn't worry on his account. And I hope on no other account either; for I'm sure that by this time the Master has been able to straighten things out."

"The Master?" Mrs. Burbank gasped.

"Yes, Astro, the Master of Mysteries, my employer and my friend, as I'm sure he is yours. Your husband secured his services, for no one else would have been able to find you and help you without danger of publicity. Come right up and you'll hear from him that everything is all right."



"Oh," she breathed, "you're not a detective?"

"Oh, if it only were!" The woman followed Valeska hopelessly.

Ten minutes after that Mrs. Burbank sat smiling in the studio. Astro had told her that there would be nothing more to fear from the persecutor who had made the last few weeks hideous. She had herself confessed everything; how, after that first hypnotic sleep, the colonel had given her persistently—so often that it drove her almost distracted—the horrible suggestion that she kill her husband. She had struggled hard against it; but the iteration of the words "Kill him!" so distorted as to be unintelligible to any one else, coming now in letters, now over the telephone, now from the innocent lips of her own child, had finally unstrung her mind; and, for fear lest in her distress she should actually commit the crime, she had run away to get out of the colonel's power.

"When I went away," she concluded, "I thought I had destroyed every evidence that might enable my husband to know how I had been tormented; that is every piece but one,—the phonograph cylinder. I was afraid I could not destroy that, and feared to leave it in the house. I took it with me when I went to see Edward, hoping that I should find some place to conceal it. But every one seemed to be watching me, and I was too nervous to risk throwing it away. So when I got to Edward's apartment I left it there in the ash barrel. I had intended to tell him everything and ask his advice, but the poor fellow was so blue that I didn't have the heart to worry him with my own troubles and I left him without saying anything."

She looked curiously at Astro. "I can't imagine how you ever found out. It's wonderful!"

Astro's look was cryptic. "My dear Mrs. Burbank," he replied, "such a nervous force as yours is intensely dynamic; it effects a disturbance of the ether, and to one sensitive to such vibration the message-impression is as plain as the ringing of a bell."

Valeska smiled and folded her hands.

"But now what am I to tell my husband?" Mrs. Burbank exclaimed. "If he knows everything he'll want to kill Colonel Trevellian!"

"The colonel will take himself out of harm's way, I'm sure," said Astro. "He has had his warning. There is only one possible way that I know of plausibly explaining your absence."

Valeska looked up swiftly, as if to anticipate his explanation.

"What can I say?" Mrs. Burbank said doubtfully.

"The truth—a woman's last resort." And Astro favored her with a rather cynical smile.

MRS. SELWYN'S EMERALD

GASPING at the splendor of the scene, the wonderful house, the gorgeously-arrayed company, the terrifying magnificence of the servants in livery, Valeska grabbed Astro's arm tightly, trembling. He patted her hand and smiled. A pompous butler bent his head to hear their names, then bellowed them into the salon:

"Monsieur Astro and Miss Wynne!"

As they made their way toward their hostess, the buzz of conversation in the reception-room was for a moment hushed. Women watched through curious eyes the distinguished, picturesque figure of the Master of Mysteries, whispered to one another, and noted critically the face and costume of the beautiful girl who accompanied the lion of the evening. Men glanced with amused contempt at Astro's oriental face, and scrutinized Valeska Wynne more indulgently. The murmur arose again, and the temporary stillness that had followed the announcement of Astro's name gave way to motion, laughter and persiflage.

The room fairly scintillated with lights, reflected from the cut-glass pendants of the silver electroliers, smoldering in the dusky gold carvings, twinkling from the jewels on women's necks and breasts, gleaming from the polished oak parquetry floor. The large double salon of the Selwyns was about half filled; there were not yet too many present to hide the elegance of the highly decorated Louis XIV rooms which enclosed the brilliant company as in an ornate frame. The ceiling, frescoed in the panels with nymphs and cupids, seemed faintly to reflect the life below; the tall mirrors multiplied the complexity of mysterious distances. There was an odor of winter roses which mingled with the perfumes of dainty women. An orchestra sounded languorously from the balcony at the head of the wide staircase.

"I'm delighted!" Mrs. Selwyn exclaimed effusively, leaning gracefully forward with a swanlike movement. She was a deliciously, almost a foolishly pretty creature, with her bright smile accented by a black beauty-spot at the corner of her mouth, her slender little fingers flashing with jewels, her lovely neck and her fair hair. It was hard to believe her a matron.

Astro, in his masculine way as striking a figure as she, presented his assistant. Valeska seemed more human than either. There was little artifice in her appearance; her costume was girlishly simple. One was not tempted even for a moment to let his eyes wander from her earnest pretty face.

"I'm so glad to see you, Miss Wynne!" Mrs. Selwyn scarcely gave her a glance and returned spiritedly to Astro. "My dear," she said archly, "I had no idea that I had captured such a lion. People are simply wild about you! Why, I've made a sensation already by merely inviting you, I assure you! Not that I didn't know you were famous and popular and all that, of course; but, dear me, it's a positive rage! You have no idea what stories I've been hearing about you!

They say you can read one's thoughts and go through a stone wall, and eat fire, and conjure the dead—and dear knows what! I'm actually afraid of you!"

"And I of you also, madam,—in that gown."

She spread her hands demurely down her sides and looked up at him from under her lashes. She wore a costume of silken mesh, sheer and delicate, over cloth of silver, touched daringly with black. The top of her corsage was caught together by an immense square-cut emerald, set in small blue diamonds. Mrs. Selwyn was evidently not beyond being pleased at Astro's compliment; but her look suggested an unsatisfied desire.

"They're expecting something wonderful," she hinted.

Astro frowned. "My dear lady—" he began.

She nodded and shook her fan lightly. "Oh, yes, I know. I shan't ask you, of course. I promised. But at the same time if something—anything—*should* happen, you know, it would be perfectly lovely; and it would make the thing go, wouldn't it? Oh, and there's an Italian countess here, whose hand I'm simply *dying* to have you read!"

Valeska, smiling amusedly at the hostess' prattle, was about to turn away, when Mrs. Selwyn caught her hand eagerly.

"It was *so* good of you to come on so unconventional an invitation! We must make you at home. You shall have positively all the men you want; I have armies of 'em to-night. And perhaps," here Mrs. Selwyn became almost coquettish, "you may have more influence with Astro than poor I. Do talk to him! Countess Trixola will be *so* disappointed if you don't succeed!"

A fresh group of guests here interrupted her, and she turned to welcome them.

Valeska took Astro's arm again, and he led her to a corner of the room where they could view the assembly.

"I see what's coming," he began hurriedly. "I'll be at my wits' end to avoid doing parlor tricks to amuse this crowd, in spite of what Mrs. Selwyn promished. I shan't have much time to attend to you, my dear. But, really, you did beautifully. Nobody would ever imagine that you were born in an East Side tenement. Why, I think you can tell the would-be's and the bounders as quickly as I can, already. It's all worth seeing, and I want you to use your eyes. Watch every little thing as if it were all of the utmost importance and you were to use every bit of information you acquired. But don't on any account lose sight of me, if you can help it, and watch for my signals. Be ready for anything. It's the accidents of life by which we profit, and there is no predicting accidents. Give me the 'up and down' sign if you discover anything particularly interesting. Well, I'll see that you are introduced. I'm going to be mobbed."

"Here's the countess, I'll wager," Valeska said.

A tall, ashen-haired, limp and insipid youth was bearing toward them, escorting a vivacious green-eyed brunette, with a narrow alert face and eyes heavily shadowed. Nearer, those dark eyes seemed a bit hard and glassy; but they were quick. She was considerably made up; but her rouge had been applied cleverly.

Astro had time only to remark out of one corner of his mouth, "Look at her right hand!" and then the countess was fairly bubbling over him.

Valeska gave the hand a glance. It hung, white-gloved, lightly by her side, the first and second fingers tentatively outstretched, the third and fourth curled toward the palm, the thumb projecting.

"You are Astro the Palmist, aren't you?" the woman asked gaily, tipping her head to one side and peeping over her fan. "Mrs. Selwyn said I mustn't bother you; but I *do* hope something extraordinary is going to happen! We're expecting something quite miraculous, after all we've heard about your occult powers!"

"My dear Countess," said Astro a bit cynically, "even saints must have holidays. I'm afraid I am out of miracles to-night."

"But at least you can tell me something about myself before you go?" she insisted.

Astro smiled quizzically. "Surely not in public?"

The pale youth burst into a guffaw.

The countess shook her finger at him airily. "Why, my life is an open book!" she protested.

"Be careful that it's open at a blank page, then."

The pale youth again bellowed and was struck on the shoulder by the countess' fan.

"Oh, I hope I'm naughty enough to be nice," she said demurely.

"Madam," said Astro, with a queer expression, "I doubt if you could be either naughtier or nicer."

"Now, what d'you mean by that?" she cried. "Why, positively I don't know whether it's the best kind of compliment or the worst kind of insult!"

"I leave it to your conscience—and your vanity," said Astro calmly.

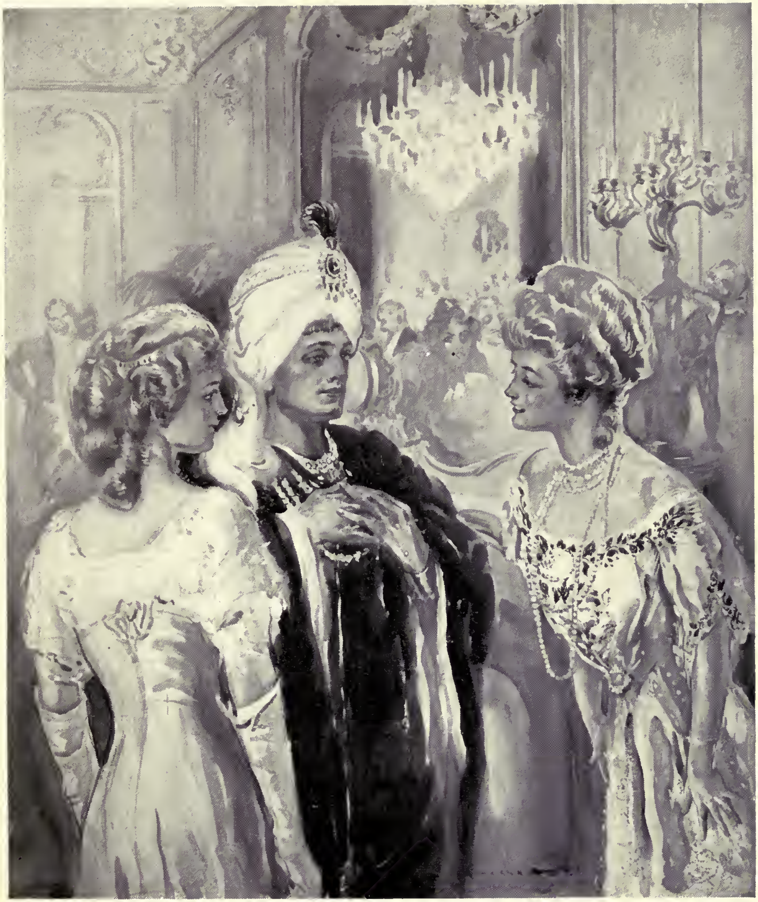
She laughed it off and turned to Valeska. "Does he say such enigmatical things to you, too?" she asked.

"Oh, he doesn't dare," said Valeska. "He knows that I'd take them all as compliments."

The group was now joined by others eagerly pressing about them to listen to the dialogue. The fame of the Master of Mysteries had grown wonderfully with the reports of his recent exploits and his reputation as a palmist was almost eclipsed by his fame as a seer and solver of inexplicable problems. The distinction of his appearance and the charm of his manner gave him a personal influence as well, and on this first appearance in society in the rôle of guest he was, as Mrs. Selwyn had said, an immense success.

Valeska's reception was as flattering. She had passed the ordeal of introduction cleverly. The men flocked to this pretty blond girl with the blue eyes, as to a popular heiress. Unused as she had been to fashionable life, her native wit and confidence, combined with Astro's own support, carried her through with colors flying. The affair soon resolved itself into a rivalry among the women for Astro's whimsical notice, and among the men for Valeska's flashing sallies.

To all hinted requests for character readings, the palmist offered polished and affable excuses. He seemed as much at home in this smart company as in his own picturesque studio. Women gathered about him, fascinated by his romantic personality, and rather pleasantly afraid of his powers as an occultist. Mrs. Selwyn persistently showed him off; but, anxious as



"I hope I'm naughty enough to be nice," she said demurely.

she evidently was to make her reception a success, kept to the letter of her promise, and did not ask him to perform any tricks for the company.

The salon filled. The talk became gayer. Astro had no time now to speak confidentially to Valeska; but from time to time he sent her a look, a motion of head or hand, which directed her attention to one or another of the party. The quick-witted girl watched him everywhere he went, and followed his cues on the instant. Long practise had made it easy for her to communicate with him thus; but this was the first public test of her facility. She played their game with a new zest, her bright eyes and high color alone betraying her excitement.

At last supper was announced, and as the company paired off and began to leave for the great dining-room, Astro succeeded in eluding his worshipers and captured Valeska for a few hasty words.

"There's something in the air," he said under his breath. "Can't you feel it? I don't know just what it is, but there is something sinister impending. Don't laugh. This is not mere professional jargon. You know I'm sensitive to this sort of thing. I never felt it more strongly."

"I have felt so too, but I thought it was a mere fancy."

"Cultivate those fancies, my dear; they're the inchoate beginnings of intuitions. Nothing comes by chance. There's a reason for every whim we have, and you must learn to trace it."

"I don't like that green-eyed woman. I wonder if she is really a countess?"

He smiled in amiable derision. "Are you?"

Valeska's eyes dilated. "Who is she?"

"That I don't know. I've tried her with all sorts of traps; but she is too clever."

"Oh, she's bad, I know that; but she fascinates me."

"She came alone, in a hired cab, Mrs. Selwyn told me. They got acquainted through mutual friends in Florence. That's all I know, except—"

He had lowered his voice to a whisper, and was leaning toward Valeska to continue, when the woman in question appeared at the door of the dining-room, cast a sharp glance up the hall, and espied them.

"Aren't you coming in, Monsieur?" She smiled bewitchingly.

"In a moment, Countess."

"I want to know if you're magician enough to tell me what Mrs. Selwyn's punch is made of. It's the most mysterious thing I ever saw."

"If it's as mysterious as you are, my dear Countess, I'll have to admit I can't fathom it."

She dropped a courtesy, tipping her head roguishly to one side, and withdrew. Astro's eyes followed her. He was much amused.

"Looking for some one," Valeska suggested laconically.

Astro nodded. "Oh—did you see that chap with a pompadour and a curled blond mustache?"

"Yes. One eye was bigger than the other,—the right one."

"Watchmaker. Comes from screwing up his right eye in his lens and using it so much. Or possibly—by Jove! a diamond cutter! Queer, isn't it?"

"Decidedly. But they seem to be sure enough of their position here. They're as well received as the other guests."

"There's something awry. I wish I could get it. It's all there in my brain, but I haven't time to think it out, now and here. Never mind. Only wait, and be ready! Come, we'll go in. I'll talk to you later. Here's Mrs. Selwyn now."

Their hostess sailed past on a young man's arm, and, holding out a hand, carried Astro in with her to a seat at the end of the room. Valeska was promptly annexed by Selwyn, a short, puffy little man with mutton-chop whiskers and a fat stomach. He had the air of not being at all at home in his own house. Nobody could seem so harmless and timid as this chubby round-faced host. He might have been an awkward servant, in his endeavors to efface himself. Seeing Valeska left alone, he offered his arm in a sudden access of courage. She was not like the others, and apparently he was not afraid of her.

"Infernal humbug, all this sort of thing!" he grumbled.

"Why, what do you mean?" she answered, a little surprised.

"Having this fool palm-reader here, and all that. Bosh!"

Valeska could scarcely repress a titter. But Selwyn was evidently quite serious about it. Seeing that he had no idea who she was, she humored him.

"It is nonsense, of course," she said gravely; "but I think that Mr. Astro is quite modest about it, don't you?"

"Oh, he's all right,—he has to make a living, I suppose,—but the women make such fools of themselves about him. I might as well give a monkey dinner and be done with it!"

Muttering thus, in an inconsequent, petulant way, he led her into the dining-room, where she was immediately surrounded by men who offered her chairs, plates and refreshments. Selwyn, more than ever disgruntled, retired to the wall, against which he flattened himself, and gloomily regarded the crowd. Valeska, besieged as she was, threw him a smile and a remark occasionally, pitying his discomfort and his timidity.

Meanwhile, her eyes were busy in the room. Once she caught sight of the green-eyed countess talking with the pompadoured man, and she noted a certain surreptitious haste in their encounter. Was it furtive, suggestive, or did she merely fancy it? From them, her glance wandered to the group of which Astro, with Mrs. Selwyn, was the center. The countess joined it, sparkling, vivid, keen. A heavy soggy dowager in black silk, with an astoundingly low-cut dress, plump round neck and innumerable curls in her gray hair, was absorbed in Astro's conversation. A débutante, as fresh as a lily, ingenuous, eager, bright-eyed with curiosity, leaned over his shoulder, holding out her hand for him to read. Valeska heard little gushes of laughter whenever he spoke. She had never before seen him in such a company, and it amazed her to see how he dominated it, how his magnetism radiated and drew one after another into his circle of influence.

So it went on for half an hour, until the party began gradually to leave the room, drifting out in twos and threes, all more or less stimulated by the supper and the champagne to an increasing good fellowship. All, that is, excepting poor Selwyn, who seemed to shrink smaller and smaller. He hardly spoke to anybody, except to apologize to some woman for stepping on her train, or to call a waiter to pass cigars or wine. His round eyes winked continually, and his lips moved as if he were talking to himself. When Valeska looked at him with an arch smile, he beamed like a child upon her for an instant, and the next all the light went out of his face.

She met Astro in the hall, passed him, and caught a sign. It was the "up and down" signal this time, denoting whom she was to observe,—a glance up to the ceiling, and down to his feet. His hand touched his hair with a little flourish. The man with the pompadour! She had it as plain as words could tell it.

She drifted away and sought the man with the pompadour. He was nowhere to be seen. The party was now humming with talk and laughter, and the double salon was crowded. The orchestra swept into a Hungarian rhapsody which seemed to waft a wave of abandon into the room. The men who followed her flirted persistently; it was all she could do now to parry their jests and at the same time keep track of what was going on about her. Astro was standing near the center of the room in a group of wonderfully dressed and dangerously pretty women, each perfect, finished, poised, yet animated and merry. Their little aigrets nodded as they talked and laughed. Selwyn, his hands in his pockets, moodily effaced himself behind the piano in the corner. Every time he saw Valeska, he beamed.

As she stood near the great hall doors, new men were continually brought up to her to be introduced, each with a new compliment or a flippant remark or a joke, each showing a friendly rivalry with the others. Valeska enjoyed it all excitedly. She could hear a nervous pitch in her voice, as she shot her frivolous retorts; but the newness of it all stimulated her. For the moment she lost sight of the pompadoured man. She was gazing across the room to where Mrs. Selwyn stood, when—

Suddenly the lights in the two electric chandeliers went out. The room for an instant seemed as black as night. Several women cried out in fright, and then a light chorus of laughter rippled round the room hysterically. In the instantaneous cessation of talk, a shuffling of feet was for a moment all that was heard.

The picture in Valeska's view remained for a moment in her eyes as clear as a photograph against the darkness; Mrs. Selwyn, merry, jubilant, talking to a fat old man; behind her the dowager, the débutante, the pale youth, all talking together; and a little aloof, the countess, with a strange expression, and her fan pressed to her lips, looking in Valeska's direction—as if she were giving a sign! Then the picture faded; a babble of voices arose. Mounting over them all, rising to a scream, came Mrs. Selwyn's excited cry:

"Oh! Stop! Help! I'm robbed!"

Valeska at the same moment felt a man rush swiftly past her, and there was a sharp twitch at the side of her waist.

Then another voice came like a bark, swift, stern, mandatory, abrupt, angry. "Light up, there, immediately! The switch is at the side of the door. Don't any one dare to move till we have a light!"

At last, after a frightened half-minute, full of whispers and shocked expletives, the lights sprang up again, and showed a room full of shocked agonized faces. Every one looked at his neighbor with startled eyes. A louder buzzing of talk arose, only to cease suddenly again as Selwyn, pushing his way into the middle of the room, took command of the situation, like a general.

"Nobody shall move a step here until we find out what's the matter! My wife has lost her brooch, the Selwyn emerald. You all know it. I insist that every one keep his place until it is found!"

What had awakened to the little man? At the crisis he had changed from a bashful boy into a wilful assertive man, dominating the room with his resolution. The talk swept excitedly about the place now; each questioned his neighbor, or stared spellbound. Meanwhile Selwyn had walked to the folding doors and rolled them shut with a bang. Then, red-faced, with a fierce scowl, he strode back to his wife:

"Now, who was near you, Betty?"

"Oh, I don't remember exactly," she answered hysterically. "All I know is that when the lights went out some one came up to me and I felt a snatch at my corsage—see where the lace is torn! Somebody stole it. It's preposterous!"

"Search everybody!" somebody called out.

"No, no!" cried others.

"See if it hasn't dropped on the floor!"

For a moment every one spoke at once, and the confusion was maddening. Then suddenly clapping his hands for silence, and speaking as sharply as an officer commanding his soldiers, Astro's voice rose over the tumult. He had sprung upon a chair, and his fine head appeared above the throng.

"Mr. Selwyn, let me find the brooch! There will be no trouble, no unpleasantness for any one. Let every one keep his place until I've finished, and I'll promise to discover the emerald."

A clapping of hands all over the room responded to his speech. Instantly the mood of the company relaxed from its nervous strain of uncomfortable embarrassment and suspicion to an amused interest.

But Selwyn shook his head savagely. "No, indeed! None of your parlor tricks, thank you! I will send for the police immediately. Meanwhile, every one in this room is my prisoner. Those who object must necessarily be regarded with suspicion."

"Oh, George!" Mrs. Selwyn pleaded, "do let Astro try it! I'm sure he'll be able to do it. He's so clever, and he has done such marvelous things!"

"Yes, yes! Let him try it!" came from every one.

Selwyn hesitated, looking half-contemptuously at the palmist. "How do you propose to find it?" he asked finally.

Astro put his hand to his head and drew his brows together. "I already feel an influence disturbing this gathering," he said. "I shall be drawn inevitably toward the person who committed the theft, as if by a magnet. Or at least I shall be drawn to the emerald," he added.

"Bosh!" Selwyn exclaimed. "That's all poppycock! What I want is a good detective and a police officer or two to search every man and woman in the room."

At this there came an indignant chorus of protest; the guests stirred uneasily.

"Mr. Selwyn, do you believe in the X-ray?" Astro asked.

The little man grunted, "Yes, I do; but this is no time for a lecture!"

"One moment, please, however! Nobody knows in just what part of the spectrum the X-rays lie, except that they are beyond the ultraviolet. They are visible only with the fluoroscope. Nobody knows just where the so-called actinic rays lie, either. They are invisible also; but they react upon a plate sensitized with nitrate of silver. Where are the N-rays, which emanate from the human body? Nobody knows; but I tell you, Mr. Selwyn, that they are registered in the gray matter of my brain. I am sensitive to them, as no one else has been, consciously, for centuries. And it is that sensitiveness that I propose to utilize. No thought can exist without modifying the molecular structure of the brain cells in the thinker. That change acts upon the ether, and is transmitted in vibratory form. Is it not possible that those ether waves can react upon the molecules in *my* brain and set up a corresponding change to that made by the original thought? Mr. Selwyn, I'll prove it!"

Astro's voice had risen to a strident tone, compelling and incisive. Every one looked at him eagerly. There was a hush. Then a volley of exclamations broke out like a storm, and Selwyn's last objections were swept away.

At last the host, overborne, and himself piqued with curiosity, gave a gesture of acquiescence. Astro stepped down from his chair, with a fixed look in his eyes, and gazed eagerly to right and left. He paused one moment, standing with his hand to his forehead, his little finger pointed upward. Valeska saw and read the signal:

"Follow the person I point out!"

He then walked up to the dowager with whom he had been at supper-time. "Will you kindly take off your left glove, Mrs. Postlethwaite?" he asked.

"The idea!" she ejaculated. "Why, what do you mean? Do you dare insinuate that I took Mrs. Selwyn's brooch?"

Her eyes were wide open as a doll's, and her anger was ludicrous to the company who watched her. For the first time since the lights went out, there was a hearty laugh all over the salon.

"Silence!" Astro commanded harshly. He turned to the gaping matron. "Madam, you must do what I ask, and do it quickly, so as not to delay the recovery! If you are innocent you have nothing to fear. If you hesitate, we can't, of course, be blamed for suspecting you."

She stared at him indignantly, muttering to herself, but tugged at her glove nevertheless. He took her bared hand and inspected the palm. Then he took her right hand, gloved as it was, and inspected that.

He left her as suddenly as he had come, however, with no comment whatever, and darted to the young débutante who had also been of his group in the dining-room.

"Quick, Miss Preston!" he said. "Take off your left-hand glove!"

Miss Preston was young enough and thoughtless enough to take the situation lightly, and obeyed him with a smile. He gave her palm a glance, then turned her hand and looked at the back. Then he left her for the pale wan youth. His glove, too, came off his left hand, and his right gloved hand was examined. The man with the pompadour came next, and the same pantomine was enacted. Astro's eyes stayed for a second or two on the man's left coat sleeve; then he passed on.

So he went from one to another, now to a woman, now to a man, until he came to the Countess Trixola. Her eyes had never left him; her hand remained on her breast, as if to hide the beating of her heart. Her eyes were hard and cold but the pupils were dilated. Her upper lip quivered a little.

"Will you kindly remove your glove, Countess? No, your right, if you please. Yes, thank you. Now your left hand, just as it is. Thank you."

He turned swiftly to the next beside her, but before he had examined the hand he had bitten the knuckle of his forefinger, as if in abstraction.

This Valeska noticed, and from that moment regardless of what he was doing, she kept her eyes on the countess. The woman had turned to a companion, and was evidently voicing some sarcastic comment on Astro's methods. As she spoke, she moved insensibly away, and backed toward another group nearer the wall by the windows. The company had now begun to move a little, and her progress was so clever as to be unnoticeable to one who did not specially follow her movements. She passed a few feet nearer the window.

Astro went on steadily, from one person to another, examining palms. In another moment, however, he had stopped dramatically, put both his hands to his forehead, staggered and dropped to the floor. A woman screamed. Two or three men ran up to support him in their arms. A physician elbowed his way through the crowd.

At that moment, while every one was staring at the group that surrounded the Master of Mysteries, Valeska saw the countess move quickly toward the window. There, for a moment, she stood facing the assembly, looking sharply about, her hands behind her back. An instant more, and she had left again and joined the man with the pompadour. She drew him aside and spoke to him. He nodded, looked behind him, and moved away.

Some one was calling for water. A man laid his hand to the door to open it, when Selwyn's voice barked out again. He assumed command again.

"No one leaves this room! This man is not seriously hurt; he hasn't even fainted. It's all a trick to cover his failure. We'll end this nonsense right now, and have in the police!"

Valeska hurried up to the group, pressed in between the bystanders, and knelt beside Astro. "Stand back, please!" she exclaimed. "I know how to attend to him. He has gone into a psychic trance, that's all. The strain was too much for him. He'll be all right in a moment, and will go on with his search."

She took his hand, and, unseen by the company, pressed it four times. Astro's eyes opened. He sat up; rose to his feet slowly; trembled; looked about; took a step forward, tentatively. Valeska still held his hand.

"Silence, everybody!" she called out, and held up her right hand with a warning gesture.

Every eye turned to the two, and every tongue was silent, as Astro moved, at first uncertainly, and then with increasing confidence, directly across the room. He stopped before a tall cloisonné vase standing in front of the window, looked at it for a moment stupidly, then lifted it and turned it upside down. Out dropped the Selwyn emerald.

A hurricane of applause burst from the company, hands clapped, and men cried "Bravo!" Mrs. Selwyn rushed forward.

Astro handed her the brooch. She gave one look at it, clasped it to her breast, and then took the palmist's hands with both hers.

"Wonderful!" she exclaimed. "It's perfectly marvel—"

Then her eyes caught a whimsical look in his, saw his cryptic smile, and her face changed. First it grew suddenly blank, then a delighted expression flooded it.

"Why—why, it was a trick! wasn't it? How clever! Oh, it was worth the fright, really! It was the best thing I've ever seen done! I never suspected it for a minute! Oh, thank you so much! I knew you wouldn't be mean enough to refuse altogether. I knew you'd be nice and amuse us some way. But my! you are a wizard, aren't you?"

Selwyn strode forward. "Do you mean to say you cooked this whole thing up, sir? Well, you certainly fooled me, by Jove! Ha, ha! You got us all going, didn't you? Think of that! But you pretty nearly caused a big scandal, I tell you!" He turned to a neighbor and began to talk vociferously about it.

The crowd swarmed about Astro now, each eager to congratulate and to praise. Every one gesticulated, almost screamed at one another, laughing, asking questions without number. Dozens of people, their conventional reserve broken down by the strain of the last few minutes, shook Astro by the hand.

The countess came up, also, to flatter him on his success.

"But you didn't tell me my character after all," she complained playfully.

The glance Astro gave her was cold and sharp. "Madam," he replied, "your character will hardly stand another such test. If you will call at my studio to-morrow, I will give you some advice. When do you expect to return to Italy?"

She gave him a long stare, grew a little pale, but shrugged her shoulders. "Are you in a hurry for me to return, Monsieur?"

"I predict a great misfortune for you, if you remain here for more than a week."

"Thank you very much for your advice, then. You are too kind! Yes, I think I shall be bored to death in this town. I shall go. Au revoir, Monsieur! I should like to know you better. We would make fine playmates!"

She smiled, and, as if reluctantly, removed her eyes, and left him.

Mrs. Selwyn drew him aside with eager eyes. "Of course, I know I'm a pig," she said, "but really, Astro, couldn't you get that diamond off the countess' hand and hide it somewhere? It would be such fun, you know! Do be nice and do just one more! They'll talk about my reception forever if you do!"

Astro laughed. "That's one thing I'm afraid I can't do. You see, the countess isn't quite so innocent as you are, Mrs. Selwyn."

"It was a pretty big chance you were taking, seems to me," said Valeska, as Astro drove her home. "Of course she grabbed the stone so tightly that it printed the marks of the facets on her white glove; that part of it was easy. But how could you be sure? You didn't look at half the people's hands."

"You noticed the way she held her fingers when I spoke to you, didn't you? I didn't have time, then, to explain. But I knew by that that she was or had been a pickpocket. The professional dip works with his first two fingers, and almost always carries his hand with them extended, and the other two fingers curled up out of the way."

"But why did you look at her left glove, instead of the right, as you did all the others?"

"I had noticed at supper time that she was left-handed. When I took my long chance, my dear, was when I trusted to you to find out what she did with the brooch. I confess that when I dropped on the floor and waited for your signal, I was rather anxious. It was up to you, then, to make me or break me. But I was sure I could trust you, and you did beautifully."

Valeska herself had been more anxious during that few minutes than she confessed. There was, however, one more thing to be straightened out in her mind.

"What I don't understand is who put out the lights," she remarked. "I forgot to tell you that I was standing near the wall where the electric switch was, and immediately the lights went out some one brushed past me roughly, and something twitched at my waist. I wonder who it was?"

Astro cast a look down at her side and smiled. "Oh, that settles something that bothered me," he said musingly. "Clever little buckles on your corsage, my dear! I wondered how that pompadoured chap happened to have his left coat sleeve cut in such a queer way, but I was too busy to think it out. I wish now I had given both of them over to the police. I expect he's a diamond cutter, fast enough! Mrs. Selwyn is lucky that six or seven different persons won't be wearing pieces of her emerald next year, Valeska."

THE ASSASSINS' CLUB

"EVERY time I see a gargoyle," said Astro, "I feel a thrill of secret kinship. It's as if I were the only one who understood its mystery. If I were romantic, I would say that in a previous incarnation I had lived in the dark ages. What do you think about gargoyles, Valeska?"

Astro looked up from a book of Viollet-le-Duc's architectural drawings and glanced across to the pretty blond head. His assistant, busy with her card catalogue, where she kept memoranda of the Seer's famous cases, made a delightful picture against the dull crimson hangings of the wall.

She came over to him and looked down across his shoulder at the pictures of the grotesque stone monsters. "Why," she said, "I've seen those horrible cynical old ones on Notre Dame in Paris, that gaze down on the city roofs. I've always wondered why they placed them on beautiful churches."

"It's a deep question," said Astro, his eyes still on the engraving. "But to my mind they symbolize the ancient cult of Wonder. In the Middle Ages men really wondered; they didn't anticipate flying-machines years before they were invented, as we moderns do. They took nothing for granted. Everything in life was a miracle."

Valeska dropped quietly into a seat to listen. Astro had many moods. Sometimes he was the dreamy occult Seer, cryptic, mysterious; again he was the alert man of affairs, keen, logical, worldly. She had seen him, too, in society, affable, bland, jocose. But in this introspective, whimsical, analytic mood she got nearest him and learned something of the true import of his life.

He went on, his eyes half-closed, his red silken robe enveloping him like a shroud, the diamond in his turban glittering as he moved his head. His olive-skinned, picturesque face with its dark eyes was serene and quiet now. A little blue-tailed lizard, one of Astro's many exotic fancies, frisked across the table. He caught it and held it as he talked.

"In the thirteenth century clergy and laity alike believed that the forces of good and evil were almost equally balanced. They worshiped the Almighty, but propitiated Satan as well; so these grotesque beasts leered down from the cornices of the house of God, and watched the holy offices of priests. The devil had his own litany, his own science. They were forbidden practises, but they flourished then among the most intellectual people as they flourish now among the most ignorant. Magic was then a science, now it is a fake. Still, a man's chief desire is to get something for nothing,—to find a short cut to wisdom. The gargoyle is replaced by the dollar mark. So be it! One must earn one's living. *Selah!* I have spoken!"

He looked up with a smile and a boyish twinkle in his eyes. Then his businesslike, cynical self returned. He jumped up, tall and eager, a picturesque oriental figure informed with the stirring life of the West.

"Valeska, I've been reading about the Devil-worshipers of Paris,—the black mass, infant sacrifices, and all that. That's an anachronistic cult. I'd like to know if there really is any genuine survival of the worship of Evil?"

Valeska shuddered. "Oh, that would be horrible!"

"But interesting." He clasped his hands behind him and gazed up at the silver-starred ceiling. "I don't mean degeneracy or insanity, but a man that does evil for the love of it, as they did in the old days. Think, for instance, of the lost art of torture—the science of human suffering—"

"Oh, don't! I hate to have you talk like that!" Valeska put a hand on his arm.

"Very well, I won't." He snapped his fingers as if to rid himself of the thought, and walked into the reception-room adjoining the great studio.

Valeska went back to her work. For some minutes she arranged her cards in their tin box; then, hearing voices outside, she looked up and listened. Then she walked softly across the heavy rugs and, touching a button in the mahogany wainscoting, passed through a secret door.

Scarcely had she disappeared when Astro returned, ushering in a young woman stylishly dressed in brown. When she put aside her veil her face shone out like a portrait, vivid, instinct with grace and a delicate, rare, high-bred beauty, full of character and force. Astro showed her a seat under the electric lamp.

"I thought you would help me if any one could," she was saying, in continuation of her conversation in the reception-room. "If it were anything less vague, I'd speak to mother about it; but it's too strange and elusive. I'm sure he has not been drinking; I would notice that in other ways. And yet he is different, he is not himself. It frightens me."

"Have you spoken to him about it?" Astro asked.

"Yes; but he won't say anything. He evades it, and says he's all right. But I don't dare to marry him till I know what it is that has changed him. I know it seems disloyal to suspect him, but how can I help it?"

"What is Mr. Cameron's business?"

"He's a naval lieutenant, in the construction department at the Brooklyn navy yard. And that is another reason why I'm worried. He has charge of work that is important and secret. If this change—whatever it is—should affect his work, he'd be disgraced; he might even be dishonorably discharged."

"When have you noticed this peculiarity of his? At any particular time?"

"Usually on Sundays, when he almost always comes to call; but sometimes in the middle of the week. At times he talks queerly, almost as if in his sleep, of colors and queer landscapes that have nothing to do with what we are discussing. Sometimes he doesn't even finish his sentences and goes off into a sort of daze for a minute; and then he'll ask my pardon and go on as if nothing had happened."

"And when shall you see him next?"

"He will probably come Saturday afternoon. Usually he stays to dinner, but of late he has been having engagements that prevent."

"All right," said the Seer; "I'll see what I can do. Knowing that he is at your house, I shall be able to orient myself and thereby be more receptive to his astral influence. I shall then be able to ascertain the cause of any psychic disturbance."

The young woman, rising to go, looked at him plaintively. "Oh, I hope I haven't done wrong in telling you about it! But I do love him so I can't bear to see him so changed!"

"My dear Miss Mannering," said Astro kindly, "you need have no fear, I assure you. Your business shall be kept absolutely confidential. With the exception of my assistant, no one shall ever know that you came here."

"Your assistant?" She looked at him doubtfully.

"Miss Wynne."

She seemed surprised. "A lady?" she asked; then, timidly, "Might I see her?"

"Certainly." Astro touched a bell.

In a moment Valeska appeared between the velvet portières, and waited there, her piquant sensitive face questioning his wish, her golden hair brightly illuminated from behind.

Miss Mannering walked to her impulsively and took her hand. "Might I speak to you for a moment?" she asked.

Valeska, giving Astro a glance, led the visitor into the reception-room.

"I had no idea that Astro had a lady assistant," she said. "I feel much better about having told him, now."

Valeska smiled at her and held the hand in both hers. "Oh, I only do some of his routine work," she said; "but he often discusses his important cases with me. I'm sure that he can help you. He is wonderful. I never knew him to fail."

"Miss Wynne," said the visitor, "no one but a woman can understand how distressed I am. I'm sure I can trust you; I can read that in your face. I am always sure of my intuitions. And, now that I have seen you, I'm going to tell you something that I didn't quite dare to tell Astro. I know my fiancé is in some trouble. But what I'm afraid of is too dreadful; it terrifies me! Here! look at this! It dropped out of Mr. Cameron's pocket the last time he called, and I found it after he had gone."

She handed an envelope to Valeska, who looked at it carefully and drew out a single sheet of paper. On this was written in green ink:

> "Be at the Assassins' Saturday at seven. Haskell's turn."

"What can that mean?" Miss Mannering whispered. "I didn't dare to show it for fear of getting Bob into trouble in some way. That word 'Assassins'—Oh, it's awful!"

"May I take this letter?" Valeska asked.

"No, I daren't leave it. Mr. Cameron may miss it and ask for it. But you may tell Astro, if you think best."

Valeska gave another glance at the letter and handed it back. "My dear Miss Mannering, don't worry about it," she said, pressing her hand. "It may not be so bad as you fear. Whatever it is, Astro will find it out, you may be sure."

When the visitor had departed, Valeska walked into the studio with the news. Astro listened in silence till she had finished; then he smiled, nodded, and took up his water-pipe lazily.

"The solution of this thing is so simple that I'm surprised it hasn't occurred to you, my dear. But that's because of your lack of experience and the fact that you haven't read so much as I have. But, all the same, there may be something deeper in it than appears now. At any rate the girl is to be helped, and the lieutenant as well; and that we shall do."

"But what about the 'Assassins'?" Valeska inquired anxiously.

"Oh, that's the whole thing, of course. But I think I'll let you study that out yourself. It will be good practise for your reasoning powers. First, let's see if your powers of observation have improved. Tell me all about the letter." He blew out a series of smoke rings and regarded her quizzically.

"Well," Valeska puckered her brows, "it was written on buff-laid linen paper of about ninety pounds weight—very heavy stock, anyway—in an envelope of the same, postmarked Madison Square station, April nineteenth, four P. M. The handwriting was that of a stout middle-aged man, who had just had some serious illness,—a foreigner, hard-working, unscrupulous, dishonest, with no artistic sensibility."

"Bravo! Is that all?"

"No, the stationery came from Perkins & Shaw's. I saw the stamping under the flap."

"Very good. Unfortunately we can't ask there about the Assassins. But perhaps we'll find my ideal criminal after all. The easiest plan will be to follow Cameron to-morrow night. Meanwhile, you had better do some thinking yourself."

Valeska sat down and gazed long into the great open fire, her brows frowning, her hands working mechanically, absorbed in thought. Astro took a small folding chess-board and gracefully amused himself with an intricate problem in the logistics of the game. When at last he had queened his white pawn according to his theory, he looked over at his assistant and smiled to see her seriousness. In that look something seemed to pass from him to her.

"Oh!" she cried, jumping up, "does it begin with an H?"

"More properly with a C," he replied.

She shook her head and went at the problem again, and kept at it until it was time to close the studio.

The next afternoon Astro and Valeska waited for two hours across Seventy-eighth Street from Miss Mannering's house before they saw the lieutenant emerge. They had already a good description of him, and had no trouble in recognizing the tall good-looking fellow who at half past six o'clock walked briskly up the street, ran down the stairs to the subway, and took a seat in a down-town local train. Astro and Valeska separated and took seats on the opposite side of the car, watching their man guardedly. At Twenty-third Street he got out, went up to the sidewalk, and walked eastward.

Beyond Fourth Avenue was a row of three-story, old-fashioned, brick houses, back from the street. The lieutenant entered the small iron gate to one of the yards and, taking a key from his pocket, went in the front door of a house. It slammed behind him.

"The headquarters of the Assassins," said Astro calmly, his hands in his overcoat pockets, studying the windows.

"And what next?" asked Valeska.

"We'll wait a while. Come into this next doorway."

On the side of the doorway they now entered was a sign, "Furnished Rooms." It was now after seven o'clock, and had begun to snow. Valeska stood inside the vestibule protected from the weather; Astro waited just outside watching the doorway of number 109. The Twenty-third Street cars clanged noisily by, the din of the traffic muffled by the carpet of snow. The open mouth of the subway sucked in an unsteady stream of wayfarers.

Suddenly Valeska put her hand on Astro's arm. "Does it begin with 'C-o'?" she asked.

He smiled. "No, 'C-a,'" he answered.

"Oh, dear, I thought I had it! But don't tell me! I'm sure I'll work it out, though. But it makes me anxious. Anything might happen on a night like this!"

"Yes, even an assasination."

"You don't fear that, really?" She looked at him in alarm.

"But I do,—assassination of a sort. What else could the letter mean?"

She had not time to answer before the door of the next house opened, and a man buttoned up in a fur-trimmed overcoat came out. He stopped a moment to raise an umbrella, and they could see that he was a stout pasty-faced German of some fifty years, with a curling yellow mustache. He wore spectacles and seemed to be near-sighted.

"There's the man who wrote the letter! Follow him, Valeska! Find out who he is and all that's possible! We must follow every lead."

Valeska was off on the instant, running down the steps and walking swiftly up Twenty-third Street.

Astro lighted a cigar, turned up his collar and waited another half-hour in the doorway. Nobody having entered or left number 109 by that time, he rang the bell of number 111. A Swedish maid came to the door.

"I'd like to see what rooms you have," said Astro.

"The only one is on the third floor rear," she replied, and showed him up two flights of unlighted stairs, steep and narrow, to a small square room, meagerly furnished. Walking to the window, Astro saw that, level with the floor, was a tin-covered roof over an extension in the rear. It stretched along the whole width of the four houses in the row. On this he might easily stand and look into the adjoining windows. Saying that he would move in later, Astro paid the girl for a week's rent in advance, and left the house and walked home.

Valeska next morning came full of news. "The German kept right along Twenty-third Street toward Broadway," she said, "and it occurred to me that I might get him to make the first advances, and get acquainted without being suspected. So I passed him, and very gracefully slipped on the snow and dropped my purse. Then I began looking about on the sidewalk for the money that might have dropped out. My German friend came along and offered to help me. It took some time, and the long and short of it was that we had quite a conversation, and I convinced him that I was respectable. He walked along with me and asked me where I was going. I said that I had intended going to the Hippodrome with a friend; but that I had been detained, and it was so late I thought I'd go home. He proposed having something to eat, and of course I refused. I had to be urged and urged; but the more I refused, the more anxious he was to have me come. Finally, I reluctantly assented to his invitation, and we went to the Café Riche.

"Well, you ought to have seen that German eat,—I mean you ought to have *heard* him eat! I couldn't eat anything myself; but sipped the wine he ordered and coyly led him on, chattering away about myself ingenuously. I had an engagement with Richard Mansfield and a three years' contract at one hundred dollars a week when he died, and was awfully anxious to get another chance. All the money I had was tied up in one of the trust companies, and so on. He kept on eating, taking the biggest mouthfuls I ever saw and leaving half of it on his mustache. Oh, I put in some hard work, I assure you!

"Then he began asking me questions, and wanted to know if I would like to earn some money on the side. Would I? I jumped at it!—five thousand actor folk out of a job this season, you know, and all that. He said I reminded him of his dead daughter—you know I'm always reminding people of somebody—and he thought he could trust me. I cast down my eyes and let him go on.

"He said there was a man he knew who had stolen some confidential papers, and he wanted to get them away from him without publicity. He needed a good clever woman to help him out on the job. I brightened up considerably. He asked me to go home with him so that he could give me a photograph to identify my victim. I said I would; although I confess I was getting nervous, not being quite sure what he was up to. He had begun paying me compliments, and when a German begins to get sentimental—well, you know!

"I took the subway with him, and we went up to One Hundred and Twenty-sixth Street. There was a big apartment hotel there, called the Dahlia,—one of those marble-halled affairs that look as if they were built of a dozen different kinds of fancy soap, with a red carpet and awfully funny oil-paintings and negro hall boys sitting in Renaissance armchairs. I refused to go up-stairs. Well, after a while he came down the elevator and handed me this photograph. What do you think?"

She handed Astro a cabinet photograph. He lifted his fine brows when he looked at it.

"Lieutenant Cameron!"

Valeska nodded. "I'm to scrape up an acquaintance with him, get his confidence, and then report to Herr Beimer for final instructions. I wonder what poor little Miss Mannering would say?"

She took off her sables, her saucy fur toque, and touched up her hair at the great carved mirror at one end of the studio.

Astro sat regarding the portrait in his hand. He looked up to ask, "Did you find out what his business was?"

She whirled round to him. "Oh, I forgot! He's the agent for a big German firm, connected with the Krupps' steel plant. They control the rights to a new magazine pistol. I was awfully interested in machinery, you know. It bored me to death; but I listened half an hour to his description of a new ammunition hoist for battleships."

Astro was suddenly electrified with energy. "Ah!" he exclaimed. "You didn't remember that the Krupps stand in with the German government and have the biggest subsidies and contracts in the world? He wants you to make up to a construction officer in the United States navy, does he? He needs a clever woman! I should say he did! Was Herr Beimer sober?"

"Perfectly, as far as I could see, except for his sentimentality. Of course he was a bit effusive, you know."

"Yes, I see. It wasn't his night. It was Haskell's night, whoever Haskell is! But I think we'll have to hurry. This looks more serious than I thought at first. I shall sleep at number 111 East Twenty-third Street to-night. And meanwhile I have a nice job of forgery for you, Valeska. I wish you'd practise copying this writing till you can write a short note that will pass for Lieutenant Cameron's handwriting."

He took a letter from a drawer. The envelope was addressed to Miss Violet Mannering. Valeska took it and read it over carefully. It was a single sheet, torn from a double page, and read partly as follows:

> "I believe that just as everything seems somehow different at night—when we can see farther than by day; for can we not see the stars?—when our emotions seem freer—so there are two worlds in which it is possible to exist. One is the dreary every-day place of business and duty and pain; the

> other is free from care or suffering. Don't we enter that occult world at night through our dreams, where there is no such thing as conscience? There are no consequences there! No doubt it's a dangerous place, because it is abnormal; but its exploration is fascinating. Why ignore the fact that it exists as a refuge from the worries of matter-of-fact existence—"

Valeska read it thoughtfully. Her eyes looked through the paper as if into a mist beyond. "No wonder poor Miss Mannering is worried!" she said to herself. She looked at Astro, as if to ask a question. He was busy with a planimeter, calculating the area of a queer irregular polygon drawn on a sheet of parchment. Seeing his tense look, she turned to her study of the manuscript.

As soon as it was dark, Astro opened the window of his room on Twenty-third Street, and walked along the crackling tin roof till he came to the first window of the house occupied by the Assassins. Looking in, he saw a small, bare, hall bedroom, furnished with a cot, a wash-stand, and one chair. The next two windows were lighted. He approached them carefully. Three men were seated at a library table strewn with magazines. All were smoking comfortably. One, Astro recognized as the lientenant, another as Herr Beimer. The third was a yellow-faced man with red hair, high cheek-bones, and dark eyes deeply set into his skull. In front of him was a plate filled with what looked like caviar sandwiches, cut small and thin.

Herr Beimer said something, at which the others laughed loudly. Then with a flourish, as if drinking their health, Lieutenant Cameron took one of the sandwiches and ate it almost with an air of bravado. Beimer looked at his watch. The lean yellow-faced man walked out of the room. The lieutenant took up an illustrated paper and began to read.

Astro tiptoed carefully back to his room, put on his overcoat, and went down-stairs, walked over to the drug store, and at the telephone booth rang up Valeska.

"Have you written the letter?" he asked.

"Not yet," was the answer.

"Well, you must do it immediately as well as you can. Bring it to number 111 and ask for Mr. Silverman."

He then went back to his room. Another stealthy glance through the windows of the club showed the two still at the table. Cameron was busy with a pencil and a sheet of paper, explaining something to the German. The yellow-faced man watched them over his book. The lieutenant was evidently talking with a little difficulty; every little while he stopped, and began again with an effort. One leg was twitching at the knee-joint. He supported his head heavily on his hand.

Going back to his room, Astro took a bottle of ammonia from his overcoat pocket and placed it on the sink. Next he poured a white powder from a paper and dissolved it in a tumbler of water, stirring it with a spoon. This done, he took the wash-bowl from the stand and put it on the table beside the bed. Then he sat down to wait for Valeska.

In half an hour she appeared, breathing hard, her cheeks flushed with her haste.

"Here it is," she said, as soon as the maid had left.

"It's the best I could do." She handed it over. It read:

> "Please allow the bearer to come in and see me on important business at any time he may present this.
> ROBERT CAMERON."

"Good!" said Astro. "Now you must wait here and listen at the window till you hear my whistle. Then come right along the roof to me and be ready for anything."

He started to open the door when she put a hand on his arm. "Does it begin with 'C-a-n'?" she asked breathlessly.

He nodded. "How did you get it?"

"From the lieutenant's letter."

"Of course. Well, it may have begun with 'D-a-n' by this time."

"D-a-n-g-e-r?"

"Perhaps. Be ready!" And he was down-stairs.

At the door of the Assassins' Club, a white-haired negro answered the bell.

Astro presented the letter. "I wish to see Lieutenant Cameron immediately!" he said.

"Ah, don't perzactly know, sah," said the darky. "Mah o'ders is not to leave nobody come in yah. Ah expect Ah'd better say no, sah."

Astro brushed past him and had set his foot on the stair, when a fat face looked down over the balusters. The portly form of Herr Beimer followed it.

"Vat's de madder?" he inquired, as he started down.

Without further parley Astro ran up the stair, and, before there was any time for resistance from the astonished German, grasped him by the knees, and pull-ing his feet from under him, sent him madly sliding down the stairs. Herr Beimer, swearing a polysyllabic oath, stumbled awkwardly to his feet and set off upstairs again after his attacker. But by this time Astro was at the top of the second flight. He dashed into the square room in the rear where he had seen the group of men. It was empty! Beside it, however, was a small hall bedroom, and here, in his shirt-sleeves, lying in a stupor on the cot, lay Lieutenant Cameron.

Astro sprang to the door and locked it just as the excited German thumped ponderously on the panels. Next he threw up the window and whistled. Then taking the lieutenant in his arms, he succeeded in carrying him to the window-sill. Valeska was already on the roof outside, waiting for him.

"Take his feet!" said Astro under his breath, and so together they managed to get the lieutenant out on the roof and to the window of the chamber in number 111. By this time the man had begun to revive and to protest in word and action against his removal. They paid no heed to him, however, and bundled him into the room and on the bed. Then Astro shook him energetically.

"Wake up, man!" he cried. "Wake up now! You can, if you try! Here! Smell this!" He reached for the ammonia and held it under the lethargic man's nostrils.

The lieutenant turned away his head, coughed, blinked, and partially rose on one arm. "Who are you?" he said, gazing at them in surprise.

"Friends of Miss Mannering's," said Astro.

The lieutenant shook his head, and stared. "What's the matter?" he brought out laboriously.

"I got you away from Beimer—afraid of trouble—want to help you." Astro spoke very distinctly, as if to a deaf man.

The lieutenant felt for his coat, found himself without one, seemed puzzled, and dropped back again limply.

"The—draw—" his voice ended in a mumble.

"Yes, the drawer! What drawer?" Astro asked eagerly.

"Find draw—" The lieutenant seemed to drop asleep.

"I wonder what he means? There's something on his mind. No doubt he has hidden something." Astro looked keenly at Valeska under drawn brows.

"Can't you revive him again?" she asked.

"No use trying the ammonia yet. It seems to have too great a reaction and sends him into a deeper sleep. We'll have to wait till he comes to himself for a moment naturally. You know what it is now, don't you?"

She nodded. "And I found it out, curiously, only from the dictionary. I looked up the word 'assassin,' and found that it came from *Hashashin* or hashish eater. Then I looked up about the Old Man of the Mountain who used to drug his followers with bhang till they would commit any crime, and that led me, of course, to *Cannabis Indica,* or Indian hemp, and I found out all about the effects of hashish."

"Yes, I thought these amateur assassins were innocent enough,—only a club to experiment with hashish; for with a moderate dose the sensations are wonderful, and well worth trying,—but there's more in this than that. What is Beimer up to? That's what I want to know."

"Is he really unconscious now?" Valeska asked, watching the prostrate form of the lieutenant as he lay flushed and breathing, but otherwise inert.

"Not really. He may be dimly aware that we are here; but his will is gone. He won't speak until he rises to the level of volition again. It's a sort of double consciousness, a rhythmic process of alternate sinking into apathy, where he sees visions, and rising into full consciousness when he can talk for a moment. I wish I knew what dose he had. The intervals are about three minutes. I tried hashish when I was in college; but I took such an overdose the last time that I have dreaded to use it again."

The lieutenant now began to mutter, as if talking in his sleep. "I'm tottering on the tops of tall pendulums. . . . The world is full of spiralated mucilages . . . lovely color. . . . In a tunnel now, twisting, turning, violet, green, orange . . . floating . . . floating like a spirit . . . tops of tropic trees . . ."

Suddenly he gasped and sat up, staring hard at them. "What did I say? What was it? Quick! before I go off again! I was saying something."

"Find the drawer," Astro suggested, leaning to him.

"Draw—draw— What was it? Drawings!" he exclaimed. "Beimer wants the drawings! For God's sake, help me! I'm losing it again! Drawings! What is it about drawings?"

"Where did you put them.

"Drawings! Yes. Un-der the—mat—" His eyes closed.

Astro tried again. "Under the mat in the little room?"

The lieutenant stared stupidly. "I forget. Mat—

that meant something. I can't get it. Wait till I come up again. . . . All snaky now, like live wires . . . pink and green. . . Ah!" The rest was inaudible.

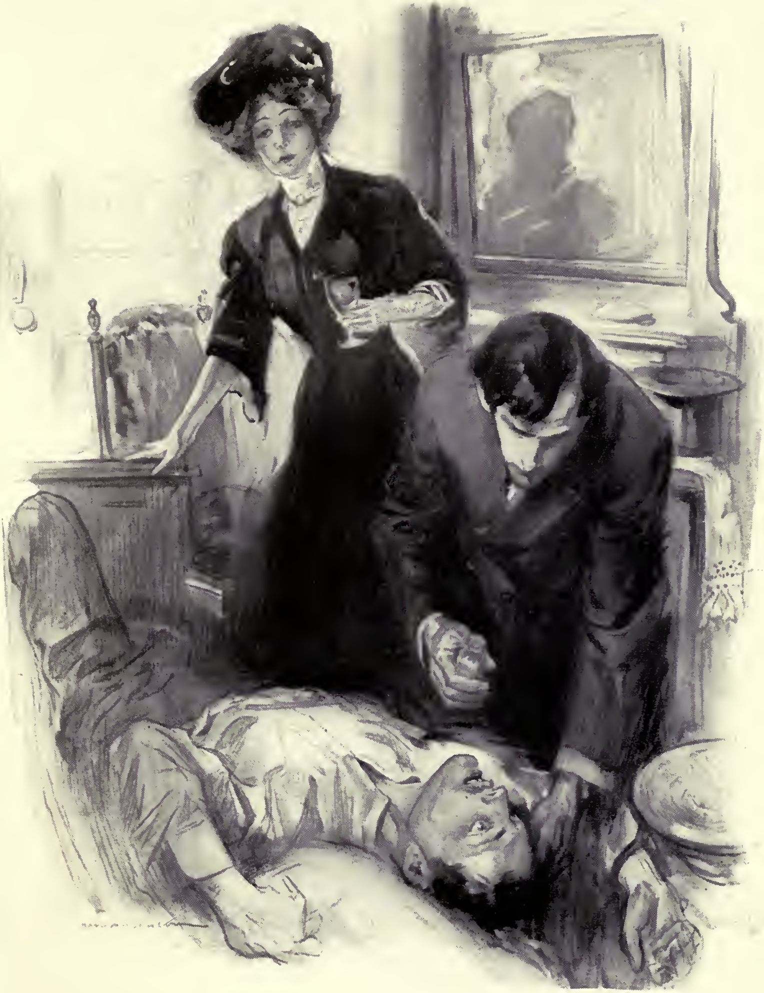
The moment he had again succumbed to the effects of the drug Astro sprang to the window. He paused there to say sharply:

"Beimer is trying to get some of the lieutenant's navy drawings, that's evident, and has given Cameron a big dose of hashish to keep him quiet till the papers can be found. I think Cameron must have suspected it, and has hidden the blue-prints or whatever they are. I'm going to go through that bedroom and see if they're under the mat. You wait here. He is likely to be unconscious for two or three minutes more now, and I'll just have time." With that, he had leaped out on the roof and was off.

The lieutenant still muttered in a whisper so low that Valeska could make out nothing. She went to the window just as Astro reappeared.

"No mat, nothing but a carpet. Beimer must have got away with them. You'll have to get after him, Valeska, while I pull the lieutenant through. If I know anything about hashish, he's had a terrific dose, and is going to have the worst case of nausea he ever had in his life. I took a look at those hashish sandwiches, —they were fairly loaded with the stuff. His first voyage wasn't a circumstance to the seasickness he'll have in about half an hour. You get right out to Beimer's place and see what you can do with him!"

As Valeska threw on her furs the lieutenant was beginning to rouse again. As she slipped out of the door and ran down-stairs, he sat up on the bed, his



"I'm tottering on the top of tall pendulums! . . . The world is full of spirilated mucilages!"

eyes glassy, his fists clenched. The effort he was making to gain possession of his mental faculties was evident in his writhing mouth and wild staring eyes.

"What was it?" he demanded.

"It's all right," said Astro. "Beimer has the drawings; but we'll get them for you." He turned for the glass of water on the table.

The lieutenant clutched his arm in a fierce grip. "Gods!" he cried. "Help me! The papers were secret plans for fire control. Man, it's ruin for me!"

"You must drink this, first of all," Astro replied, holding the glass to the man's lips. "It's an emetic. We must get this hemp out of your stomach before you can recover."

It was too late. The lieutenant dropped back, now as rigid as a marble statue, only his wild eyes moving. He spoke painfully through his clenched teeth.

"Oh, God!" he murmured. "Take it away! I can't drink it! I'm going through hell!" His brow was furrowed with tense lines as he fought with the deathly nausea that was working in him.

Astro put down the glass and waited. It was evident that nothing could help now, and the drug which had thoroughly impregnated the man's system must work off its own effects.

"It works so—so fast . . . All black now . . . Oh, God! . . . I'm afraid! . . . Afraid . . ." He began to moan.

"You're all right; there's no danger. You're just a little sick, that's all."

"I'm dying! It's no use . . . Tell Violet . . . I'm dead . . . Don't you see, man? I'm dead already . . . The world is full of spiralated mucilages —that's the inner secret of Death—spiral . . . I'm whirling through space . . . Dead!"

Astro smiled. It was, he knew, a common symptom of an overdose of *Cannabis Indica.* There was, as he said, no danger. He waited for the crisis, attending to his patient like a trained nurse. For a while the moaning continued; then Cameron began to curse wildly, like a man with the delirium tremens. Then of a sudden he sat up in bed, and the convulsion came. His outraged stomach revolted at the burden it had to bear. During this Astro waited on him kindly, and when the active stage of nausea had passed he laid the lieutenant back on the bed and waited till he sank into a natural sleep. Then he took a small book from his pocket and began to read.

For half an hour he read the little volume of the *Morte d'Arthur;* for another half-hour he sat in a brown study, his eyes fixed on the pattern in the worn carpet. There was a zigzag figure in it which resembled the letter M.

The lieutenant moaned in his sleep, and felt under his bed mechanically with one hand. Astro's eyes followed him.

Then, with his face suddenly illumined, he rose quietly, threw up the window, and passed out on the roof. In less than five minutes he returned with a smile on his lips. He took up the book again and began reading.

It was after midnight when Valeska returned in great disappointment. She took off her coat and looked sadly at the lieutenant, who was now sleeping peacefully.

"It was no use," she said. "Herr Beimer wasn't in, and no one knew when to expect him. I waited as long as I dared; for I hated to come back unsuccessful."

"It was too bad I was so stupid as to send you away out there," said Astro quietly. "I should have taken time to think it over, first. It came to me an hour after you had left. Here are the blue-prints, safe and untouched."

"Oh!" she exclaimed joyously. "Did he tell you where they were after I left?"

"No, before you left. Didn't you hear him?"

"Under the mat? But I thought you looked and found none there."

"My dear," said Astro, with a whimsical expression on his face, "you should learn to concentrate, to focus your subconscious mind upon itself. The psychic state of receptivity—"

"Oh, bother!" Valeska exclaimed. "Where *were* they, if they weren't under the mat?"

"Under the mattress," he answered.

The lieutenant sat up, now fully recovered, and looked at the two. Astro handed him the blue-prints. He grasped them exultantly. For a while he lay weakly looking at them, saying nothing. Astro put on his overcoat and helped Valeska into her wraps. Just before he opened the door, he turned and said:

"I don't think I need give you any advice, Lieutenant. Go to sleep now, and you'll be all right in the morning. If you have gone through what I did the last time I was an 'assassin,' there is no danger of your ever trying it again. I think that Miss Mannering needn't know about this, certainly I shall not tell her."

"What *does* she know? Did she send you to help me?" the lieutenant asked anxiously.

"She asked my advice, that's all. Unfortunately she saw the name 'Assassins'; but I think you can explain that easily enough, if you don't care to confess the truth."

"How *can* I explain it?" Cameron said thoughtfully.

"Why, tell her that the club met to kill—time," said Astro, "and that at that you are a tolerably successful assassin."

THE LUCK OF THE MERRINGTONS

LATE one afternoon in February, a policeman, standing on the corner of Thompson and West Fourth Streets, gazing abstractedly across Washington Square, felt something brushing against his trousers. Looking down, he saw a little child of scarcely three years holding something up to him.

"See! See!" she was saying.

The officer opened his eyes in amazement. In one little fist the baby held a fire opal as large as a robin's egg; in the other was a shriveled black hand.

He grabbed them from the child and questioned her; but her prattle was meaningless. Taking her carefully in charge, he hurried to the station-house and reported the incident to the sergeant at the desk.

Next morning the city papers "played up" the account of the astonishing affair, with a picture of the child, the officer, and the two extraordinary objects with which the baby was found. That afternoon the mother of the little girl came to claim her daughter but was unable to explain the incident. She lived in a tenement on a level with the elevated railroad, on West Third Street, and had missed little Elsa at five o'clock. Inquiries in the neighborhood elicited the fact that Elsa had been seen about four o'clock in the afternoon in the basement tenement of a house across the street, a place used as a cheap laundry. The laundress had noticed the child playing at the wood-pile; but had been too busy to send her home. When she had finished hanging her clothes in the back yard and had returned to the wash-room, the child had gone. The baby had been found by the policeman at a quarter to five. Where she had been in the interim it seemed impossible to discover.

The case was turned over to the detective force, and was eventually taken up by Lieutenant McGraw. He worked at it a day without success, and then, recalling the many services done him by his friend, Astro the Seer, he determined to seek his help. McGraw's earlier experience with the palmist had been at the time of the Macdougal Street dynamite outrages and the Hunchakist murder, mysteries that Astro had solved privately. Assuming the credit of this, McGraw had been promoted and had paid his debt of gratitude to Astro in several ways. He had often secured information for the palmist that no one outside the police force would have been able to obtain. The mutual relation having proved profitable, McGraw did not hesitate to apply to his gifted friend in this case, which had become prominent in the papers.

Astro, free at the time, and rather bored with his ordinary routine of chiromancy and astrologic work, readily undertook the commission. He questioned McGraw on the details of the affair, and dismissed him with a promise to go about the matter immediately.

"It will probably be easy and interesting," he remarked to his assistant, Valeska, who had been present at the interview with McGraw. "It is these cases which are apparently so extraordinary that are most easily solved. Given any remarkable variation in the aspect of a crime, and you know immediately where to begin. This will be only play, I fancy. We'll go right down and look the ground over and see the lay of the land. Of course the important thing is to trace the child's route from the basement laundry, in the middle of the block, to the corner."

"Why, the obvious course would be along two sides of the rectangle,—along West Third Street and up Thompson Street to the Square, wouldn't it?" said Valeska.

"Undoubtedly. And yet, if little Elsa went that way, along the sidewalk, it seems impossible that some one wouldn't have noticed her and remarked the surprising playthings she was holding in her hands."

"She might have only just picked them up, near the corner."

"Very true. We must carefully go over all possible routes and then determine the probabilities. But let's go down and look at the exhibits in the case. I confess I'm curious as to that hand."

Astro's green limousine was entered, and he and his assistant drove immediately to the detective bureau on Allen Street. McGraw welcomed them, and taking them into an inner room, displayed the relics.

The opal was nearly an inch long, a perfect ellipse, shot with colored fires. As it was shifted in the light the play of color was mysterious and surprising.

It seemed now suffused with blood; now it glowed with pale green; then a blinding ray of pure yellow shot forth. It seemed to hold impossible distances and atomic cosmic worlds within its shell. It winked like a living thing; it glared and blushed; it was at once baleful and beautiful.

The hand, however, seemed never to have had to do with life or motion. Dried like a mummy, strung with tendons like a turkey's claw, wrinkled, stiff, all color dulled into the hue of earth, it was a horrid thing. Valeska turned away from it in disgust; but Astro still peered at it, examining it, inch by inch, from the long coarse nails to the dissevered wrist.

"Well?" said McGraw.

"A negro's hand," Astro replied. "It has been buried. A man of at least forty. Cut from the arm during life. And yet—" He did not finish the sentence; instead, he said abruptly, "Take us to the laundry."

At the basement McGraw left them, Astro preferring to be alone with Valeska during his investigation. The two entered the cellar after McGraw had introduced them to the proprietor. She pointed out where the child had last been seen, and then went on with her work.

The front of the basement was used for one of the small wood and coal depots common in the poorer districts of New York. Partitioned off with rough boarding was a little chamber where the Italian who sold fuel lived. Behind this was the laundry where two girls, bare-armed, were washing. Two of them lifted a basket of wet linen and went out into the yard with it while Astro and Valeska watched.

In each of these rooms Astro spent considerable time, letting his eyes rove in every direction, searching every foot of the walls, ceiling, and floor. After each survey he gave a nod to Valeska and passed on. The laundry itself occupied more time. He watched the girls at work and their going and coming attentively. Then he went back to the wood-pile and knelt down on the rough floor, crawling here and there, watching, smelling, fingering everything in the vicinity. The track he pursued led back to the little room where the Italian slept. There he spent more time, searching carefully. When he rose and dusted his clothes, he handed Valeska a bent safety-pin.

"Keep that safe," he said. "I think that little Elsa has been playing under the Italian's cot bed."

Hardly had he spoken the words than the stairway was darkened, and a man bearing a loaded basket came down the steps. He put down his load and, seeing strangers, demanded roughly:

"What you doin' here, what?"

"Oh, looking about," said Astro coolly. "I've lost something, and I came here to find it."

The Italian stared. "What you a-lost, what?"

Astro kept his eyes on him. "I've lost a large opal," he said calmly.

The man began to tremble. "Opal! Wha's that?"

"I'll show you." Astro walked into the man's little room and lifted the mattress. Between it and the canvas cover of the cot appeared a small box. On its cover was printed, "Heintz & Co., El Paso, Texas."

"I no gotta eet, I no gotta eet! Sure! De littla babee she stole eet away." The man watched Astro's face apprehensively.

"Where did you get it, anyway," asked the Seer.

"My uncle in Italy, he give it to me," the man protested.

They talked for ten minutes; but the man persisted in this story. Giving up the attempt, Astro was about to return to the laundry, when his eyes fell on the basket the man had been carrying. He stopped and took off a few pieces of kindling, then, after a quick look at the Italian, took something from under the pieces of wood. It was a human skull.

"Perhaps you'll tell me where you got this?" Astro demanded sternly.

The Italian's face brightened. "Oh, a littla boy, he geeve eet to me for ten cent," he said simply.

Astro turned to Valeska with a baffled expression. "In heaven's name what kind of place are we in, where babies play with dead hands and human skulls, to say nothing of giant opals hid in cots?"

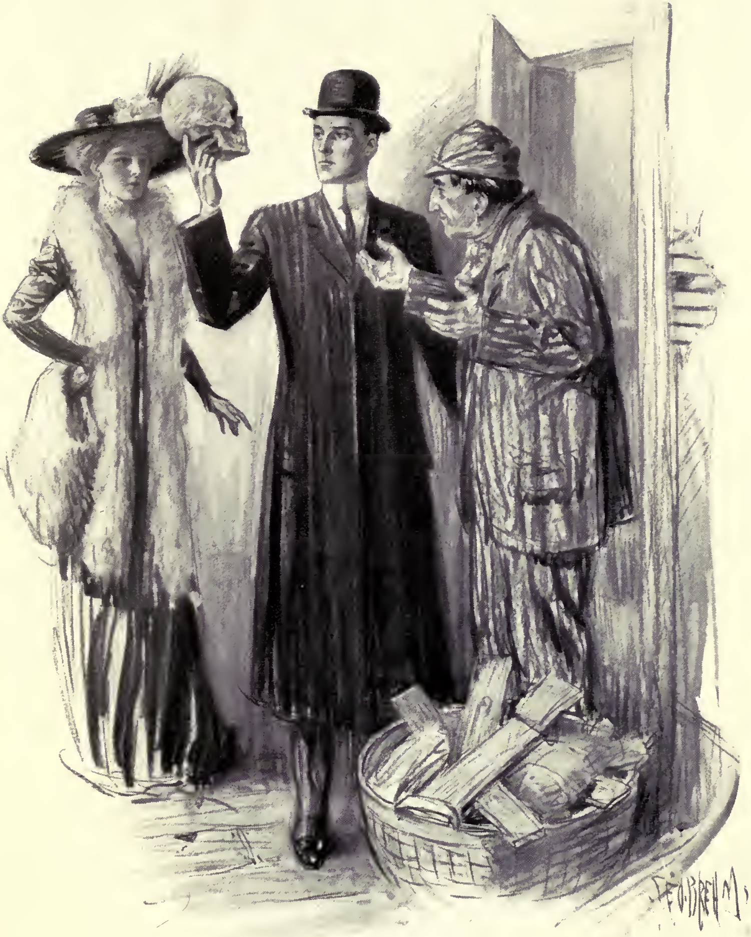
"Yes, yes, a littla boy, on Washington Square, sure!" the man repeated.

Astro placed the skull on a shelf and regarded it attentively. For some moments he said nothing; then, shrugging his shoulders, he passed into the laundry. Valeska followed him.

"The man is lying, of course," she said. "But what a barefaced falsehood! Would anything be more improbable?"

"He's lying, it's true," said Astro; "but it may not be all false, nevertheless. We'll have to wait till we finish our examination." And with that, he walked out into the back yard.

The place was half-filled with clothes, drying. The ground was completely bricked over and surrounded by a high fence. On the farther side of this and be-



"What kind of place are we in, where babies play with dead hands and human skulls?"

yond the yards of the abutters appeared the rear of the houses on South Washington Square, or West Fourth Street, rising four stories high. On the right and left were other yards. Astro began at the right-hand side of the house and examined the fence foot by foot all round the three sides, till he had come back to the house again at the left-hand side. Then he looked up at the windows of the house opposite. A second examination of the fence opposite the laundry took more time. Meanwhile, Valeska followed him and did her best to interpret his movements.

"Well," he said, as he returned to the laundry door, "what have you discovered?"

She spoke eagerly. "Why, there's a hole broken in the fence on the north side, and it seems to me it's big enough for a baby to crawl through. Besides, as the clothes are hung now, it is well hidden, and little Elsa might easily have got through unnoticed."

"Did you notice her footprints beyond, in the earth of the other back yard?"

"No." Valeska was apologetic.

"Well, they are there. Nothing else?"

"Why, no."

"Look again!"

Valeska went carefully along the fence and finally stopped at some vertical scars half-way up the north wall. "What do they mean?" she asked.

"That's the false half of our Italian friend's tale," said Astro. "Never mind them for the present. Now we'll call at the house opposite."

They left the basement and walked round the block, climbed over some excavations in the street, and rang the bell. A buxom, jolly young woman opened the door. Astro asked for rooms to let, preferably in the rear.

"We ain't got but one now," she replied. "That's on the third floor up, and it ain't vacant yet though. You can look at it. Was you married?"

Astro laughed and, ignoring the question, followed the woman up three flights of stairs, followed by his assistant. The landlady threw open a door, and the three entered. Astro gave a quick look around the apartment.

It was in confusion, cluttered with clothing and newspapers, old boots and cooking utensils.

"And he ain't paid me for t'ree weeks yet, neither!" she added. "I give him the bounce two days ago. He come home drunk in my house! I don't keep no lodgers like that!"

"What day was it he came home drunk?" Astro asked.

"Only Thursday. He nearly fell out the window, he was so soused. He had a black eye, too."

"What time was it?"

"Oh, about four o'clock. Look at them rags, now! What d'ye think of that! The pig dog!" She picked up a long dirty strip of cloth on the floor. "Bah!" she cried. "It smells like a graveyard, don't it?"

Astro took the rag and examined it carefully. It smelled strongly of creosote. He laid it on a table, and with a secret sign called Valeska's attention to it. Then he walked to the window, threw up the sash, and looked down.

"It would be a bad drop, wouldn't it?" he said.

The landlady laughed. "I only wish he had fell out!"

"Who lives on the floor below?"

"Oh, a Spaniard and his wife; but they ain't been here for two weeks now. They pay all the same."

"And on the second story?"

"Oh, I live there myself with my dog."

Suddenly Astro exclaimed aloud, "The deuce! I've dropped my hat. How stupid! I'll have to go down in the yard and get it."

"Never mind; I'll go down," said the woman.

Astro, however, insisted, and before she had a chance to offer again he was running down-stairs. A sign to Valeska told her to occupy the woman's attention for a while; and this Valeska did successfully. Finally she and the landlady walked down-stairs, the girl talking with animation, the woman giggling and laughing and showing a set of big good-natured dimples. They waited in the hall for Astro to return.

He shook hands with the landlady cordially. "I'll let you know about the room, if I want it," he said. "But I like the landlady better than I do the room. What are they doing on West Fourth Street?" he continued. "Digging for a new drain?"

"Yes," she said. "All the time they are digging up, somewheres. It makes me tired, this New York! I wish they'd get it finished."

"When will your lodger come back to pack up his things?"

"Oh, I wish I knew my own self. He's a crook, I think, that man; he's got a bad eye. All the time he brings such funny things home. Bags and things, and sometimes watches."

As soon as Astro and Valeska were alone he smiled and said, "Well, it's as easy as I said it was going to be, isn't it? All we have to do now is to search the hospitals."

Valeska thought it over. Then she spoke slowly. "I suppose that rag was wrapped round the hand, wasn't it?"

Astro nodded.

"The man came home drunk—he sat down by the open window and dropped the hand?"

Astro nodded again.

"The baby crawled through the hole in the fence with the opal, I see that. She found the hand in the yard under the window, where it had been dropped. Then, somehow, she passed through the kitchen and came out on West Fourth Street, here, and walked to the corner, where she met the policeman. That's all plain enough. But where did this man get the hand, and where did the Italian get the opal?"

"Take the last question first. You recall the up-and-down marks on the fence?"

Valeska assented. "Oh! The Italian climbed over there?"

"He must have. He must have seen the box drop. He climbed the fence and grabbed the box and didn't notice the hand. Then the baby came along, before this man, who was evidently a pickpocket, awoke from his stupor. You see, he came home with the bag he had snatched—"

"Oh! That was that leather bag with the handle cut?"

"Of course. He went to the window and sat down, unwrapped the dead hand, and dropped it, or placed it in his lap. Then he looked at the opal, and, beginning to drowse, dropped both into the yard. When I went down there I saw footprints, undoubtedly the Italian's, in the earth."

"But that leads nowhere, after all?" said Valeska. "How in the world should an immense opal and a hand be in the bag that was snatched?"

"That's what we have to find out," said Astro.

"And why should the Italian have a human skull in his basket?"

Astro laughed. "That's where the true half of his lie comes in. Undoubtedly a boy did sell it to him. It wasn't till I spoke to the woman about the excavations in the street here that I recalled that Washington Square was in old days the 'Potters Field.' Many graves have been found here, and no doubt the gamins of the neighborhood have watched every shovel and got the skulls there. The Italian fancied it,—thought perhaps he could sell it to some doctor,—and so brought it home. In fact, I think we have eliminated him from the affair altogether. Of course, he'd never dare say he stole the opal."

"And what about searching the hospitals?"

"For the original owner of the bag, of course. The thief came home with a bruised eye. That means he had a fight; but, as he brought off his booty, he must have punished his man pretty badly. Consequently he is now probably in a hospital. We have to look for a man from El Paso; for there is where he got the opal, or at least the box in which it was kept. Well, we'll leave that till to-morrow. I believe I have an engagement for five o'clock, haven't I?"

"Yes. A Miss Merrington."

"Who is she?"

"I haven't found out anything about her. You'll have to hurry."

They got into the limousine and drove rapidly to the studio, where Miss Merrington was waiting. While Valeska busied herself with the file of daily papers she had as yet had no chance to look over, Astro interviewed his visitor in the great studio.

Miss Merrington was a tall willowy brunette, with plenty of humor in her face, well dressed, and evidently fairly well-to-do. She had come, it seemed, on a peculiar errand. In brief, as she told it to Astro, it was this:

Major Merrington, her grandfather, had been a United States Army officer on a special errand in Mexico at the time of Maximilian's régime. He had had the good fortune to be of service to the emperor, who had been duly grateful. In return for his services, the emperor, at their last meeting shortly before the end of Maximilian's tragic career, had rather jocosely offered him his choice of two gifts. The first was a large box of the famous cigarettes of Chiapas, made by an old woman who had been famous for her tobacco for years and had recently died. This cutting off of the already limited supply had increased the value of the genuine cigarettes enormously. Mexicans held them in almost superstitious esteem. They were said to have all kinds of esoteric virtues and to bring extraordinary happiness. The first cigarette, when smoked, was as mild as Virginia's tobacco. The second was always as strong as a black cigar and produced a sort of half-trance, like opium.

The alternative gift was an old Aztec relic. Miss Merrington did not herself know its exact nature; but she did know that all sorts of good luck were attributed to its possession. It was this gift that the major had chosen. "The Luck of the Montezumas" it was called; but, as the "Luck of the Merringtons" its name seemed to be as inapt as it had been to the Aztec emperors. With it, whatever it was, and escorted by a trusted negro slave named Ptolemy, the major had journeyed half-way from Chihuahua to El Paso, when his party was attacked by brigands. Their last stand was made in an adobe ruin, where the major had been killed. What had become of the "Luck of the Merringtons" and what it really was, was what Miss Merrington had come, in a rather skeptical and playful humor, to ask of Astro the Seer.

She had got so far, when a muffled electric bell was faintly heard in the studio. Astro, who had listened attentively, excused himself to get a book of astrologic tables which he said it was necessary for him to consult before he could answer Miss Merrington's question. Around a corner of the book-shelf was a sort of alcove cupboard, hung with black curtains. He parted them, and a glass window was disclosed. Pressed against this was a newspaper showing the "Lost and Found" column. One was ringed about with a blue pencil. It read:

> "LOST—A large opal, on Second Avenue, Thursday last, at two P. M. Finder will be paid a generous reward and no questions asked. HENRY MERRINGTON, Bellevue Hospital."

Astro dropped the velvet curtains, reached on the shelf for an immense volume bound in heavy leather with silver clasps. He took it to the table near where his visitor sat and threw it open. The pages were parchment, written with beautiful medieval letters, with illuminated initials and many zodiacal diagrams. For some time he turned the leaves thoughtfully; then stopped to ask:

"Do you know the exact date of your grandfather's birth?"

Miss Merrington, unfortunately, did not. He asked, then, for her birthday, which she gave to the hour. Astro turned to another diagram, and taking a pencil, made a few computations.

"H'm. Under the sign Libra, with Mars and Saturn in the ascendant—a daughter of the Ninth House—the moon. Wait a moment. Let me see your palm."

She drew off her glove, and, not a little mystified, but still smiling as at a child's game, showed her hand. Astro gave it a glance, turned it over, doubled the knuckle of the third finger. Then he sat down, nodding his head.

"It's too absurd," he said. "One can't often strike a fact so definitely as this appears. If I'm not mistaken, the 'Luck of the Merringtons' is here in New York. It's—let's see," he looked at his diagram and figures again—"forty-seven, that's right. Violet, indigo, blue, green,—that's fourth,—yellow, orange, red,—that's seven. Green and red— Why, it must be an opal; that's the only stone that's both green and red. It's a fire opal, probably a Mexican gem, not the Austrian milky-blue stone. Curious, isn't it?"

"Yes," she drawled, "if it's true."

"Well, if you'll wait a moment, I may be able to find just where it is."

"Oh, I'll wait a long time to get back the family luck, bad or good," she said.

Astro shut his eyes and remained silent for a time. Then he shuddered, put his hand to his head, and said slowly, "I get the name Allen. Allen Street, that's it. And I see a man in a blue coat guarding it. He has brass buttons—oh, yes, he's a policeman." He shuddered again, and appeared to come to himself. "What did I say?" he asked ingenuously.

Miss Merrington repeated his words.

"Oh, that must mean the detective bureau," said Astro.

"It's perfectly wonderful—at least, if it turns out so!" the woman exclaimed. "I can't wait to find out, though I don't see what I can do. I haven't lost any opal, and I can't pretend to. I only know the old story about the 'Luck of the Merringtons' as my father told it to me. You see, grandfather never told in his letter just what it was. No doubt he was afraid of being robbed of it. But there's one other question I'd like to ask you. I have an older brother who went to Mexico two months ago, and we have had only two letters from him. Can you tell me where he is now?"

"His name is Henry, isn't it?"

Miss Merrington stared. "Why—yes! How did you know?"

"It's my business to know such things," said Astro. "Your brother has had an accident but is not seriously hurt. You will hear from him in a very short time."

"An accident!" Miss Merrington's face paled. "That frightens me dreadfully! Do you know," she went on, "somehow, what happened to my grandfather is so suggestive! My brother went to Mexico on purpose to trace up the 'Luck of the Merringtons.' He had a foolish idea that he could find it. It has always been a family legend only, but we children took it seriously. Lucky or unlucky, we wanted it in our possession. Henry always said that if he ever had time and money for a vacation, he was going to Chihuahua to track down that heirloom, whatever it was. It was because I was so impatient to find out about it that I came to you. I thought you might give me some hint that would help him find it. I wasn't worried at his not writing, because I knew he might be away from the railroad; but I was impatient to have news. And I've heard such things of you, so I thought I'd come, for the fun of it. I never expected you could do anything so specific as this, though. Now I'm worried. Oh, I hope Henry's all right and safe! If he only comes back, I don't care if we don't get the 'Luck of the Merringtons,' though heaven knows we need it badly enough! Our luck couldn't possibly be worse than it is now, I think. I've been a companion for a rich woman for a year; but I can't stand it a day longer, and I'm going to be a stenographer."

"I predict a better fate for you than that," said Astro. "I think the family luck will return. You wait patiently for a few days and see if I'm not right."

Valeska came into the studio as soon as Miss Merrington had gone. "It seems to me you took a long chance," she said, as she sat down.

"My dear," said Astro, throwing himself on the red velvet couch and drawing up his narghile, "I took no chance at all. If this Henry Merrington who advertised is not her brother, the opal is, of course, not the 'Luck of the Merringtons'; but she will never know whether it is or not. If her brother has gone on a rough trip to Mexico, he'll scarcely escape without an accident of some kind, though it may be slight. Whatever he finds as a relic, he can't prove it is the true 'luck,'—can he?—and I'll have the benefit of the doubt. But we must look him up immediately and get his story. I confess I'm still at sea about that hand."

"Why didn't he let his sister know, if he was injured?"

"Probably didn't want to frighten her. Perhaps he was drunk. Now he's lost the 'luck,' he hopes to get it back before she finds out he is here, so as not to disappoint her. But come. I confess I can't wait. We can't get in after eight o'clock."

The two set out, therefore, without waiting for dinner, and after Astro had sent up a card marked "opal", a nurse brought word that her patient could be seen. He had been robbed and sandbagged, as Astro had surmised. He had lain unconscious for several hours; but was now recuperating, and would need only another day in which to be quite well.

He was frankly curious as to his guests, and could hardly greet them before he had sent away the nurse and demanded their errand. In a few words Astro told him exactly what had happened to the famous opal, without confessing how it had been traced. In as mysterious a manner, he let Merrington know that as a Seer he was aware of the esoteric and magic properties of the stone and its tradition.

Merrington listened with immense interest, delighted to learn that the opal had been found, and that he could probably claim it without a reward. He then took up the story of his quest where his sister had left it.

"I founded my whole hope of finding the thing on what I had heard of Ptolemy, the negro. I knew he was brave and clever and faithful. I always put this murder with the story of the Sancy diamond, which I suppose you know. Baron Sancy, you remember, when told that the messenger who was carrying the celebrated gem had been killed, said, 'Never mind, the Sancy diamond is not lost!' He sent men to disinter the body of the messenger, and found the stone in the stomach of the corpse of his faithful retainer. That's something the way I reasoned it out. It was a wild-goose chase; but I succeeded marvelously. I discovered the place where the attack on my grandfather had been made; I found the very adobe ruin where he had made the last stand. Some of the old people there remembered the story,—how my grandfather had been shot first, and how Ptolemy, defending the wooden door, had his hand chopped off with an ax before the brigands could enter. But no one had heard of any precious stone or other valuable thing that would account for the legend, though everybody in Chihuahua knew the story of the 'cigarettes of Chiapas'.

"Well, it took a month to locate the grave; but, after disinterring several coffins, I found one larger than usual, decayed almost to paper. And when I opened it—which was easy, it was so rotten—there, in the skull, between the upper and lower jaw-bone, was a fire opal as big as the end of my thumb! It was the 'Luck of the Merringtons,' I was sure, if for no other reason because, from that time till it was snatched out of my hand on Second Avenue, things went gorgeously with me. One of my *mosos* put me on to an abandoned claim, an old gold-mine that had been lost for years. In a month I sold out my interests for thirty thousand dollars. Every one in the place became my friend. I found an old schoolmate who insisted on my going into partnership with him, and—on the train coming north, I met the nicest girl in the world!"

He sank back in his cot with a smile. "Now my luck's come back," he added, "I'm going to present the opal to my sister Helen and see what it'll do for her."

"But one thing I don't understand," said Astro. "Did you get nothing but this opal from the grave?"

Merrington did not notice the incongruity of the remark, apparently. "Oh, I forgot!" he exclaimed. "That was a funny thing, too! You know Ptolemy's hand had been buried with him. Something had mummified it, somehow, while the rest of the body was pretty far gone,—nothing, really, but bones and a few tendons. Well, I thought I'd take the dried hand as a relic of poor old Ptolemy. It was ghastly; but I didn't know but that would bring luck, too. But no doubt that was what queered me, after all. I wonder what became of it?"

"You'll find that at the detective bureau, too," said Astro. "If I were you, I'd give it decent and honorable burial."

"I will!" said Merrington. "And by to-morrow afternoon I'm going to appear and surprise my sister. I hope she hasn't worried about me."

"But I always thought opals were unlucky," said Valeska, as she left the hospital with the Master of Mysteries.

"My dear," he replied; "nothing is unlucky, but thinking makes it so; and nothing is lucky but—" He looked at her a bit sadly, adding: "Well, I'm afraid you'd hardly understand."

THE COUNT'S COMEDY

ENGROSSED in his own thoughts a young man waited in the great dim studio of Astro the Seer, nervously punching the magnificent Turkish rug with the ferrule of his cane. He was young, well groomed and smartly dressed, apparently well-bred. It was evident that he was more worried than impatient.

He looked up with a scowl as Astro, dressed in his red silk robe, wearing his turban with the moonstone clasp, leisurely entered the apartment. For a moment the young man gazed at the Seer as if to estimate the man's caliber and character. Astro said nothing; but, bowing gravely, took his seat on the big couch and lazily lighted his water-pipe, waiting for his visitor to speak.

"I have come to you," the young man said finally, "although I must confess I don't quite believe in occult powers, because I have an idea that you must know considerable about human nature. You certainly see plenty of it."

Astro bowed again, and a faint smile curled his lips.

"I have also heard you called the Master of Mysteries," the young man continued.

Again Astro bowed.

The young man rose and handed the palmist a card. It read, "Mr. John Wallington Shaw."

Astro looked at it and tossed it on the table.

"I suppose you know who I am?"

Astro again bowed.

"It's a part of your business, I suppose. You may have read in the papers also of my sister's engagement to Count D'Ampleri?"

The same sober gesture of assent from the palmist.

Shaw sat down again, shoved his hands into his pockets, crossed his legs, and leaned back. "Mr. Astro," he said, "I have come here on a queer errand. I suppose you see many strange things in your profession, and it seemed to me that your experience would enable you to give me some help. What I want you to do first is to believe something that's nearly incredible."

"My dear sir," said Astro, speaking at last, "nothing is incredible. From what I know of life, the more impossible it seems to be, the more probable it is. For that matter, one has only to read the papers. But seriously, if I can help you in any way, I shall be glad to do so."

Shaw now took a gold cigarette case from his pocket, selected a cigarette, knocked it against his fist, and struck a match. After the first long inhalation he remarked, "You'll promise, then, to believe the extraordinary story I tell you?"

"Mr. Shaw," Astro replied, "it's easy enough for me to perceive that you are a gentleman. I expect an equal amount of perception from you. At any rate, I hardly see why you should come here to tell me an untruth."

"But what I mean is, I'm afraid you'll think I'm—well, a bit crazy. It's simply too ridiculous. Why, I wouldn't believe it myself, hardly!"

"Let's have it. You have really excited my curiosity." Astro folded his arms and looked at Shaw with sharp eyes. "You certainly show no symptoms of derangement yet."

Shaw gave a nervous laugh. "Oh, it isn't I; it's my sister. That's why it is so hard to tell. I assume, of course, that this confession will be kept confidential. Not only that, but I expect you to help me out—for an ample consideration."

Astro bowed. "I have secrets enough in this head of mine to destroy a dozen of the first families of New York," he said a little dryly.

Shaw shrugged his shoulders. "Very well. I'll waste no more time. You'll see how useless it is to appeal to the police, or even to my lawyer. But first, have you heard of the robbery of Mrs. Landor's jewels?"

"Oh, yes. The thief, I believe, has never been discovered. It always seemed to me curious, too, that no reward for their return had ever been offered. But what have they to do with your sister?"

Shaw gazed up at the ceiling, then down at the floor. "Really, I'm almost ashamed to tell the story, it's so confoundedly absurd. We are Westerners, you know, of good, sound, and healthy stock. We're as sane as Shakespeare. No trace of brain storms or paranœa in our family! The thing hasn't gone far; but it will be talked about if I can't stop it; that is, if you can't. I don't know what to do. I'm up a tree. You've got to get hold of whoever's responsible for this thing, and tie them up, some way. It's a serious problem for us."

Astro put his fingers to his lips and yawned.

Shaw took the hint and proceeded abruptly: "Mrs.

Landor's jewels are at my house, a whole teapotful of them!"

"Ah! You know the thief, then?"

"No, I don't; nor do I know what the deuce I'm to do with the loot! One thing you are to do is to return it."

"And be accused of the theft myself?"

"Oh, that won't need to follow. They have to be sent back somehow. I don't want my sister to be accused of cleptomania; the other thing is quite bad enough. The idea of a gorilla in a top hat and all that! It would make a pretty scandal if it was found out; I can fancy how people would talk. We have a great many friends, you know." He smiled cynically at the word.

"She is innocent, I presume, then?" said Astro. "But what about the gorilla?"

"There's no use in beating about the bush any longer," said Shaw. "Only, you see, I wanted to make sure of you before I trusted you with the secret. I'll go ahead with it, and if you call it a cock and bull story, I don't see that I can blame you. You see, it was this way: We were down at our country place at Lakeside,—a big, rambling old house with a veranda all round it and long French windows opening out on it. My sister's room has a little balcony; it's on the second floor. She had gone up-stairs to dress for dinner. I was in my own room, a little way down the hall, and my door was closed at the time. We had a lot of company down for the week-end; it was ten days ago."

"Who were there?"

"Oh, the count, of course, and his valet, and the Churches—you know, Simeon Church and his wife—

the Raddelle girls, and two or three others. I'll give you a list later, if you like."

"All right, go ahead."

"It happened, as I say, just before dinner; about half past seven. It was quite dark. We don't light up much outside,—there was nothing going on at that time. Well, I heard her door open, and then she was pounding on mine, and she called out, 'John, John! Come here quick!' I opened the door, half-dressed as I was, and she was in a deuce of a funk. She grabbed me by the arm and pulled me down the hall and shut her door. Then she said, 'Oh! what shall I do?' I said, 'What's the matter, Ethel? Have you been robbed?' She was nearly fainting, and I thought she would drop before she could speak. But finally I got it out of her. And her story was a wonder, and that's a fact!"

Shaw, in his excitement, rose and gesticulated.

"She had sent her maid out of the room for something, and had her back to the French window and was stooping to pick up a comb, when she heard the sash open, and she looked around in a fright. There, standing right in front of her, was a big black gorilla, bowing to her."

"H'm!" Astro concealed his amusement.

"Wait! I made her tell me the story half a dozen times, and it was the same each time. The thing had on a silk hat, and a Peter Pan collar, a red necktie, and white kid gloves, and pearl gray spats buttoned around his knees."

Astro could control his mirth no longer, and his grave demeanor exploded in a gust of hilarity. Shaw, despite his anxiety, had to join the laugh.

"What do you think of that for a fairy tale? But that's not half. This baboon—"

"You said gorilla before."

"Well, gorilla, then; it doesn't matter in a nightmare like that. He held a china soup-plate in one hand, and in the other a black bag,—a cloth bag. By Jove! that much I can swear to myself! I've seen it. Well, the chimpanzee thing—"

"I thought it was a baboon."

"How the blazes do I know? I wasn't there, and if I had been I shouldn't have known the difference. It may have been a monkey or an anthropoid ape, for all I know. Anyway, it set the soup-plate down on the dressing-table, and tipped its hat and said, 'Miss Ethel Shaw, I believe?' "

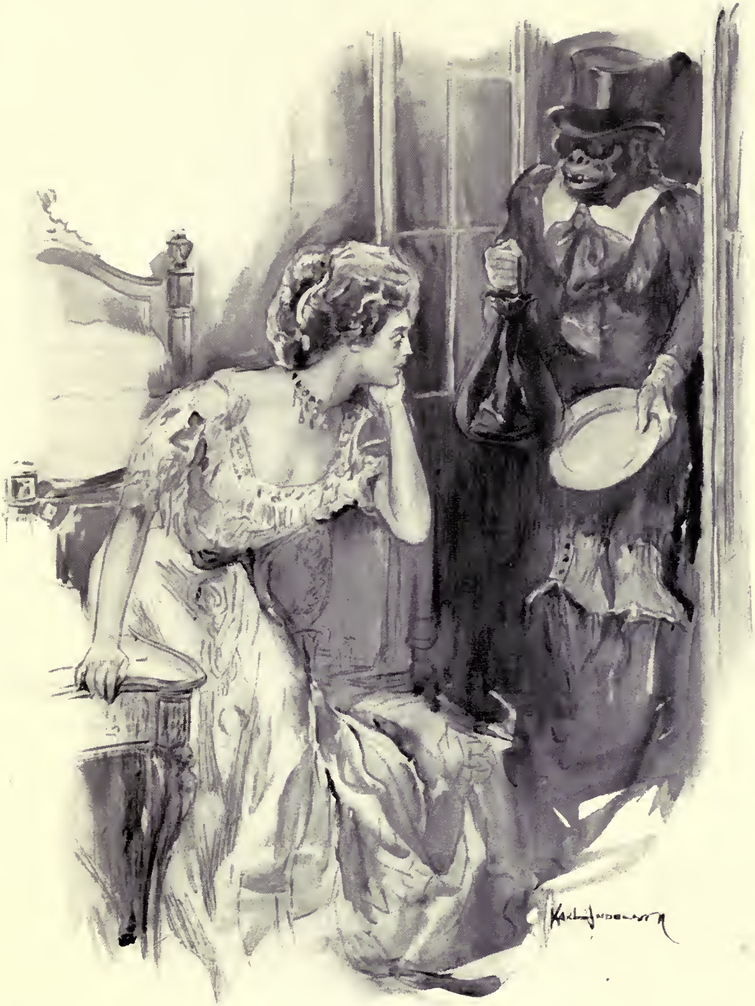
"Ah!" said Astro. "Now we're getting warmer!"

"Warm! He's made it hot enough for poor Ethel, I can tell you! Then, without waiting for an answer, —Ethel was out of her wits by this time, though she half suspected a practical joke, too,—the orang-utan—"

"Or monkey," Astro interjected, smiling.

"Yes, or gibbon perhaps—held out the bag to her. It said, 'From your friends and well-wishers in the lunatic asylum.' Then it did a graceful two-step over to the window, recited 'x^2 plus $2xy$ plus y^2,' and vanished on to the balcony. My sister was so frightened that she dropped the bag, and—bing!—out dropped Mrs. Landor's pearls and brooches and rings and things all over the floor. Now I ask you what kind of a story is *that* to get all about town?" He stared at the Master of Mysteries gloomily.

"Well, it certainly would add to the gaiety of nations," Astro remarked quietly; "but it looks like a



Then it did a graceful two-step, recited "$x^2+2\times y+y^2$," and vanished onto the balcony.

pretty slim case if your sister had to rely on it for a defense."

"We'd be laughed out of court," Shaw said.

"Did your sister give you any further description of the creature, anything that could identify the masquerader?"

"Why, she said he was a little knock-kneed, she thought; but that might have been on account of the spats." He grinned sadly, in spite of himself. "Oh, I forgot! By Jove! yes! His breath smelled of garlic, and he wore automobile goggles!"

This was too much for Astro. It was some time before he could take the thing seriously.

Shaw waited patiently until the palmist stopped laughing. "I knew you'd think I was a blanked fool," he said mournfully; "but it's no joke to the Shaw family, I assure you. Anybody would say Ethel was crazy. I did myself, the very first time she told me this yarn. I said, 'Ethel, you're foolish!' But there was the stuff to prove it! Then she began to cry. The worst of it is, the count is absolutely convinced that Ethel is mad.

"As soon as we had dressed and gone down to dinner, Ethel told the story to the whole crowd. Of course we consider D'Ampleri already as virtually a member of the family, and the others are old friends. Oh, their friendship will be tested, all right enough! The count looked shocked and changed the subject pointedly, as if the thing was suspicious. It was perfectly evident that he discredited my sister. It made me foam at the mouth; but what could I do? What can we do now? Ethel, of course, persisted in her story, and the count has grown cooler and cooler ever since. I'm afraid he'll talk. We can keep the others quiet, easily enough. They have skeletons of their own to hide. What do you make of it, anyhow? Is there any way out?"

Astro puffed at his water-pipe for a few moments in silence, as he thought. The smoke, rising in a blue swaying curve, writhed in a faint arabesque against the velvet hangings of the walls. Shaw had begun punching holes in the rug with his cane again. From the portières leading to the reception-room, where Valeska, Astro's pretty assistant, sat, pretending to work, came a silvery chime of bells as the tall clock struck four. It had begun to grow a little dark. Astro pressed a switch and lighted an electric lamp depending from the ceiling. Instantly the walls glittered with points of light from the embroideries, the weapons, the golden carvings, and other decorations.

"What is your father worth?" the palmist asked.

Shaw seemed to awaken from a daze. "If you had asked me two weeks ago, I'd have said, roughly, four millions, or possibly five. But this recent deal in lead has bit him hard. His shrinkage is nearly seventy-five per cent., I suppose. He was almost ruined, in fact. But if you're in doubt as to your fee, why, that'll be all right. It's worth five thousand dollars to us to have the matter settled. We'd have to pay that in blackmail, I suppose. If you can think of any way to return the jewels and no questions asked and head off this insanity charge, the money's yours."

"Had any dowry been settled on Count D'Ampleri?"

Shaw blushed faintly. "Oh, I say!" he began.

"I'm aware that it's a Continental practise, that's all," Astro said suavely. "It is inevitable with an international marriage, isn't it?"

"Yes. I fought against it as hard as I could; but Ethel can make the governor do anything she likes. Besides, my mother was set on the match, you know, and she helped arrange all that. They do it through lawyers, you know. It isn't quite so crude as it sounds; but it's bad enough. Yes, we arranged to buy the title for Ethel, I suppose." He kept his eyes on the rug in some embarrassment. There was a trace of anger in his tone. It was evident that the affair did not please him in any way.

"Very well. I'll undertake the commission, delicate as it is," Astro said, rising. "I'd like to have the jewels delivered here sometime next week. You had best bring them yourself. I wish also you'd find out just when the Count D'Ampleri arrived in America, and by what boat. I suppose you can tell me the day and hour of your sister's birth?"

Shaw wheeled round on him. "Oh, come, now!" he protested. "I came to you because you know or ought to know most of the weaknesses of human nature; but if you think I take any stock in astrology or occultism—"

"What was the date, did you say?" Astro's voice was hard.

"October 14th, 1885; nine A. M., I believe." Shaw scowled.

"My dear Mr. Shaw," said Astro, "if you give me this commission, you must let me do it my own way. It won't matter to you, I should think, how I do it. You are, I presume, an agnostic. Very good, I am a fatalist. Go to a detective or a doctor, if you prefer modern science. I prefer the ancient lore."

"I came to you because you've done harder things than this," Shaw said to placate the independent Seer. "Go ahead with your cusps and nativities, if you like, only get us out of this fearful mess as safely and quickly as you can."

"I hope to see you on Monday," said Astro, bowing with dignity.

John Wallington Shaw left the room. As soon as he had departed, Valeska entered, laughing, the dimples showing in her cheeks and chin.

Astro's pose had gone. He threw off his robe and turban. "Did you hear the uncouth history?" he asked.

Valeska nodded. "Of all things! Can it be true?"

"Easily. Simple as milk. And at the same time one of the cleverest schemes I ever heard of. It's all straight; that is, all except the jewels. That we'll have to investigate."

"But I don't understand it at all," Valeska pouted.

"Have you happened to hear that Count D'Ampleri has been paying rather too marked attention, for an engaged man, to Miss Belle Miller, the lady whom the cruel wits of the Four Hundred have dubbed the 'Bay Mare'?"

"I knew she was in here one day for a reading."

"And was much interested in my prediction that she was to marry a titled foreigner. I heard the gossip at the Lorssons the day I went to that tea. I never forget items of that sort. They are more important than horoscopes."

"I think I have a glimmer of light now," said Valeska. "The Bay Mare is an heiress, isn't she?"

"Rather! Old man Miller owns half of Buffalo."

"And Shaw is on the verge of failure."

"And the count wants a good excuse to transfer his affections and his hopes of a permanent income. What better escape than to impute insanity to Miss Ethel Shaw? I say it's a merry scheme."

Valeska frowned. "It's horribly cruel!"

"Well, it's infamously Italian, if you like. Fancy one of the Borgias reappearing to grace the twentieth century! But you can't deny it is cleverly worked out. Insanity is one of the best reasons for not marrying, even for a fortune-hunting foreigner. Every one will pity him, instead of blaming him, and he'll walk out of the Shaw family into the arms of the Millers. He only wanted to be well off with the old love before he was on with the new. But I'll forgive him anything for the sake of the automobile goggles."

"And the Peter Pan collar!" cried Valeska, laughing. "Couldn't you hear me giggling in the closet?"

"The Landor jewels, though!" said Astro thoughtfully. "If it wasn't for them, one might suspect that Miss Ethel had taken an overdose of headache powders. Acetanilid does affect the brain, you know."

"The question is, who played the gorilla?"

"Ah, an Italian, I'm afraid. If you'll pardon the pun, I think that garlic puts us on the scent. As I see it, it's a case where our friend McGraw can help us out. I'll try him. There'll be no particular credit in it for him; but, what's just as good, there'll be money."

From an interview with his friend, the police lieutenant, that night Astro found out that no one had been suspected of the robbery of Mrs. Landor's jewels strongly enough to warrant arrest. Ethel Shaw and her fiancé were both present at the Landor reception held on the night when the jewels were stolen. A charge of cleptomania might, therefore, be reasonably preferred against her. As young Shaw had said, such an accusation, coupled with her testimony as to the method by which she obtained the jewels, would deal a serious blow to the Shaws' social aspirations.

McGraw had too often profited by Astro's assistance in puzzling cases not to do his best to help the palmist; but nothing was known by the police about the count or his valet. It was found, however, that, on his passage across the Atlantic in the *Penumbria,* Count D'Ampleri had taken no servant. This of itself was of sufficient importance for Astro to request McGraw to look up the man and furnish a description of him and his circumstances. This, in a few days, revealed the fact that the valet had a dubious reputation, and it was suspected that he had been in prison. McGraw himself was not sure at first; but subsequently a brother officer familiar with the Italian quarter of New York positively identified him as Kneesy Tim, who had done time for second-story work, and was so called among his pals on account of his knock-knees.

It did not take the officer long after that to ascertain through the detective force that Tim had attended the Landor reception as Count D'Ampleri's valet. The line of evidence was now direct. Tim had welded the most important link of it himself by appearing as the bearer of the stolen jewels. His boldness was accounted for, of course, by the fact that he relied on his ludicrous appearance to make Miss Shaw's story incredible, at the same time preventing any identification of himself. In all this it was impossible not to suspect the count of being an accessory; if, indeed, he did not plan the whole thing.

But why had the thief been willing to surrender such valuable booty? If the count were merely after money, here was a treasure in the hands of his accomplice. The answer was an easy one for Astro to solve when Shaw produced the black bag full of Mrs. Landor's heirlooms.

The jewels were all false. Astro's critical eyes needed but one careful look at them. They were marvelous imitations; but of no possible use to any one except the owner who would never be suspected of having hypothecated her celebrated gems. It was evident now why Mrs. Landor—the respectable, aristocratic Mrs. Lemuel Landor, of the Landor jewels—had never offered a reward for their capture. Astro, cynical as he was, familiar as he was with the many hypocrisies of the upper ten of the town, could not help laughing when he held the famous Landor tiara up to Valeska's envious view.

"I'll never believe in anybody or anything again!" she exclaimed. "Did you tell Mr. Shaw?"

"Not after his remarks on my profession," said Astro, with a decided shake of his head. "That's the time he did himself out of a hearty laugh at Mrs. Landor's expense. In any case, I don't believe in ever telling any more than is necessary."

"The count is an ordinary crook, then?"

"I doubt that. Nor is he even an ordinary count. He's a clever bourgeois Frenchman. I have talked with him and know. I imagine that he picked up this fellow Tim to help him play the part, and found out afterward what he was and used him. But that doesn't matter. We have them now on the hip."

"And how are you going to fix him? From what I hear, he is more attentive than ever to the Bay Mare, and people are talking about it."

"That doesn't matter. If Miss Ethel can get rid of him without his telling that ridiculous story, she'll undoubtedly call it good riddance to bad rubbish. And I will fix that."

"How?"

"My dear, if you'll walk up and down on Eighth Avenue, between Thirty-seventh and Thirty-eighth Streets, from twelve till half past to-morrow night, you'll see. And," he continued, smiling to himself, "I think it will be worth your attendance. I think we might ask Shaw to escort you, if he's willing to disguise himself a little, enough so that the count won't recognize him."

"I shall be there," said Valeska.

"I promise a comedy," said Astro. "By the by, it may interest you to know that I have rented a room at number 573 Eighth Avenue."

"Indeed!" said Valeska, raising her brows. "I imagine from your tone that I'm not to ask you any questions; but I would like to know if you are through with McGraw?"

"No, indeed. McGraw is to figure as the *deus ex machina;* also he is to earn two thousand dollars. One he will collect from me, and one from Mrs. Landor, who will be very glad to pay, I imagine, if he acts strictly in a private capacity. In other words, it is not particularly to Mrs. Landor's interest for the public to know that she has sold her jewels and wears paste."

"I begin dimly to comprehend now," Valeska mused. "You will emulate the Mikado of Japan, and 'let the punishment fit the crime'?"

Astro replied, "My dear, in the mutual interaction of telepathic vibrations, one neutralizes the other. Two loud sounds can be made to produce a silence. *Selah. 'Tara ak khaldah maha tara. Abracadabra, maha tara.'* "

"Boom-de-ay!" Valeska added gaily.

"Precisely. And, speaking of nonsense, I didn't ask you to get me a pair of white duck trousers and a yellow-striped blazer and an old woman's wig and a green umbrella and a white top hat, did I?" He looked thoughtfully at his finger nails.

"No, you didn't," she replied briskly; "nor a bottle of soothing syrup nor a tombstone."

"Nevertheless, you will do this to-morrow morning, and have them sent to number 573 Eighth Avenue."

"I agree, if you'll only let me add some rubber boots."

"Well, as a special favor, yes. Now run along and I'll get to work. Oh, Tim was arrested to-day, on suspicion of having stolen the Landor jewels. Too bad, isn't it?"

He sat down, thereupon, to write a letter as follows:

> *"Commesso sbaglio gravissimo. Lei è in un gran pericolo. Venga a trovarmi martedì a mezzanotte sulla porta del no. 573 Eighth Avenue. Venga solo. T."*

He showed it to Valeska and translated:

> "Terrible mistake made. You are in great danger. Meet me Tuesday at midnight in the doorway of number 573 Eighth Avenue. Come alone. T."

Roughly scrawled on brown paper, and put into a plain but dirty envelope, the note was convincing. Tim, at any rate, would not be able to deny it for some time. It was not a message that the Count D'Ampleri would dare ignore.

The Count D'Ampleri did not ignore it. Smart and aristocratic in appearance, though foreign-looking with his Parisian silk hat, his queer trousers, and his waxed and pointed mustache, he was prompt at the rendezvous. Valeska and John Wallington Shaw, drifting slowly down the block, noticed him there waiting in the dusky doorway, looking impatiently up and down, smoking a cigarette. The count seemed to be a bit uneasy. He lighted one cigarette after another.

The two spectators passed again, talking absorbedly one to the other, but watching guardedly as they passed. At the Thirty-seventh Street corner they noticed a man standing, his back against a lamp-post. A child would have known him to be a policeman in plain clothes. His burly figure, his bull neck, the very cut of his mustache, proved it indubitably. He gave them a wink as they passed him. They crossed to the other side of the avenue and walked slowly. As they reached the far end of the block they suddenly stopped. Valeska began to giggle, pointed, and excitedly watched the scene across the street. Shaw seized her arm and hurried her over the crossing and to the front of the doorway. The little drama was almost over. As they stopped, staring, a fantastic figure retreated, entered the door, and banged it behind him.

They were laughing at the count's discomfiture as McGraw came up. He took his cue like an actor, and walking up to the count grabbed him fiercely by the arm.

"Now then," he said harshly, "what you a-doin' here? What's that you got there?" He pointed to a black bag the Italian still held in his hand.

"Who are you, anyway?" said the count angrily. "Vat beesness of yours? Tell me that!"

"I'll show you!" and McGraw threw back his coat and displayed his badge. "See here now! What have you got in that bag at this time of night, hangin' round in this doorway?"

"My God! I don't know myself!" the count exclaimed.

"I'll see, then," said McGraw, and snatching it from him he opened the bag and drew out a diamond tiara.

"You don't know!" he thundered. "We'll see about that at the station-house! Come along with me!"

The count, seeing the jewels, seemed almost ready to faint with surprise and horror. "But I am very innocent!" he wailed. "I am ze Count D'Ampleri. I live at ze Saint Regis! You shall see! Before heaven! I never knew that things was there! It was give me just now, by—by—" He paused, discomfited.

"Well, by whom?" was McGraw's inquiry.

"You will not believe—nobody won't believe—it ees too much! A mad woman she give me zis bag just now zis minute!"

"What kind of a woman? Out with it!"

"Oh! what shall I say? You will not believe. A woman like a man, with white pantaloon, with a topper hat, a yellow jacquette with stripes like zis." He made a pitiful gesture down the front of his coat.

"Aw, g'wan!" said McGraw. "D'you expect me to believe a pipe dream like that? That's the worst I ever heard, and I've heard some thin ones, too!"

"But I tell ze truth, I swear it! She have a green *ombrelle.*"

"Any more? Go as far as you like." McGraw's tone was affable.

"She wear big boots of *la gomme,*—what you call it —rubbaire."

McGraw towered above him now, and calmly folded his arms. "No blue whiskers, or purple hat pins stuck in her face, was they? She wasn't chewin' shavin's or had red fire on her hands, I suppose? Lord, man! you got no imagination at all! Why, I can dream out things that would make that old lady seem like a fashion-plate. When I dope 'em out they generally wears armor plate and glass gloves at least. But I guess that'll be about all for you. I'm going to run you in."

The count in despair appealed to Valeska. "But ze lady and ze gentleman, she see ze old woman! Ask them! I am spik ze truth to you!"

Valeska, smothering her laughter, did her best to speak calmly. "We saw nothing at all, officer. The man must be intoxicated."

"Or crazy," Shaw put in wickedly.

"You see nozzing?" the count ejaculated in amazement. Then he dropped in a dejected huddle, nodding his head sillily.

McGraw motioned to Valeska, and nodded toward Thirty-seventh Street.

"Well, I'll have to go," she said, smiling. "You'd better be careful, officer; he may be dangerous." And so saying she walked away with Shaw, who was too nearly hysterical with mirth to speak for a while. When he did, it was to say:

"Will you kindly inform Astro when you see him that I take back what I said about horoscopes and occultism? I am quite sure he will understand."

She repeated the message next day, when she and Astro found themselves alone in the studio. Astro smiled. "If they were all like John Wallington Shaw," he said, "you and I wouldn't make much of a living, little girl." Then he added irrelevantly, "I understand that the Count D'Ampleri is to sail on the *Germanic* next week."

"Oh. Then McGraw let him off?"

"All McGraw wanted was to get his thousand out of Mrs. Landor, and the less talk about it the better. He telephoned me this morning to say that she gave him a very lively half-hour, but paid. By the way, I wonder if Shaw told his sister Ethel how the matter was solved?"

"He said he intended to, before he went to bed."

"Then we may consider the episode closed." Astro took down a volume of Immanuel Kant. Before he began his reading he remarked casually, "It was a narrow escape for all three. I don't know exactly which one to congratulate the most."

"I'd congratulate the old lady with the white duck trousers and the blazer," said Valeska. "I think she had the merriest time of all."

"Yes," said Astro, his eyes twinkling, "I think so myself!"

PRISCILLA'S PRESENTS

THE winter afternoon had wrapped itself in darkness before Astro spoke. He had bent for twenty minutes over the chess-board, vividly illumined by an overhead electric lamp, while Valeska's keen eyes watched him attentively. Outside, the clanging of bells and the rattle of cars had grown gradually fainter as the falling snow spread a blanket over the pavements. Within the palmist's studio the two were surrounded by shadowy objects enlivened with twinkling lights caught on the polished points or planes of embroidered patterns or ornaments.

Suddenly Astro rose and switched on a blaze of light. The whole picturesque splendor of the apartment blazed in color, from the heavy tones of the oriental rugs to the gilded coffered ceiling. The walls, half lined with books, surrounded the luxurious furnishings of the studio, which in their elegance and rarity gave the place almost the air of a museum.

"Mate in seven moves!" he announced.

His pretty assistant wrinkled her brows in the attempt to analyze the game. For weeks she had been studying with him the mysteries and complications of the Muzio gambit, and, though she was well along with the strategics of the play, Astro's extraordinary imagination made him mentally able to keep many moves ahead of her. She sighed whimsically and looked up at him. He put his finger on a black ivory piece as he spoke with a droll look in his eyes.

"It all came because of your absurd fondness for the knight!"

"I admit that I am partial to knights," she replied. "I'm always willing to exchange a bishop for one."

"I wonder why?" Astro mused. "No doubt because the knight's move is symbolical of a woman's way of thinking. She loves to jump over things in the logical path of reasoning: one move ahead and one diagonally to the right, one backward and one obliquely to the left, or anyway rather than along a straight line." He laughed a little cynically.

"And do men never think that way?" she asked demurely.

He put his chin in his fist and nodded his head, shaking his waving black hair. "That's queer, too. They do, sometimes. There are types that do, races that do; Orientals, for instance."

"And aren't you oriental?" she asked.

He walked away suddenly and picked up his little white tame lizard from its silver cage. "Oh, Egypt is hardly the Orient. Egypt is—well, it's Egypt, the eternal mystery."

He turned quickly to her. "I never believed you were Irish," he said. "I wonder what you are?"

"Pure troll!" she said nimbly.

"I have solved many mysteries," Astro replied, and now his voice was softer; "but you are the most mysterious of all. Somehow, I hate to know too much about you. Well, let's call you a troll." He picked up the mouthpiece of his narghile.

A bell tinkled. Valeska, after a glance at the Master of Mysteries, pressed a button on the wall. In a moment a boy in buttons entered, carrying a salver, on which were letters. Astro took them up and spread them on the table under the lamp. Valeska looked playfully over his shoulder. Then, with a queer expression on her face, she seated herself.

"All from women!" she commented. "I wish—"

"What?" The Seer wheeled in his chair.

"Never mind." Valeska took up a book.

Astro rapidly opened the envelopes and cast them aside one by one. The last, a letter on heavy blue paper, he read a second time and tossed it over to Valeska.

"Read it aloud," he said. "I want to think."

Valeska read as follows:

> "My Dear Astro—You will remember, perhaps, having read my hand some months ago, and having told me some most *wonderful* things about myself. It was all so *marvelous* to me that I though you might be able to help me in a funny thing that has been happening for the last five weeks or so. Of course, I apply to you in *strict confidence,* and I *hope* you will understand."

"Oh, cut all that part out," Astro interrupted, "and all her feminine circumlocutions! Get to the business!"

> "Well, then, five weeks ago last Saturday I received a mysterious present of a pair of *beautiful* slippers. I had *no idea* where it came from; but supposed it was from a Mr. Thompson, who had been rather attentive to me. But he denied it. The next Saturday I got another parcel, by mail, containing a *lovely* bound leather album, beauti-

> fully tooled. Then I suspected a Mr. Gerrish; but he has denied sending either. Since then, *every Saturday* I have received a parcel by mail, every time a different thing, and I'm simply *wild* to know who is sending these things. If you think you can find out for me, I'll be glad to pay you whatever fee you charge, as I can't *stand* it not to know any longer. If you'll make an appointment, I'll come and see you any time.
>
> "Yours sincerely,
>
> "PRISCILLA QUARICH."

"Isn't it lovely?" Valeska exclaimed. "It's a welcome relief from the murders and robberies and things. I'm glad that there are some benevolent criminals."

"Slippers—album—" the Seer mused. "Too bad she didn't mention the other gifts."

"Why? Do you think it's so very mysterious? It's romantic, of course; but—"

"Five Saturdays in succession—" Astro went on thoughtfully.

"Slippers are a funny present," said Valeska. "You have to know the exact size, of course."

"Thompson—Gerrish—" Astro rose. "This should be your field, Valeska," he said, smiling. "My specialty is the intricacy of the human brain. You ought to know about the human heart. Of course it's a love-affair."

"And of course you know nothing of love," she added.

He tossed the black locks from his brow and gazed at her thoughtfully. "No—of course not." His voice was low; he did not look at her.

Then he threw off his mood. "Write her in answer, Valeska, to this effect: In order to settle this rather delicate question for her, I shall have to meet the two men. Suggest that she invite me to dinner and have them there. You'll be invited, of course. Suppose we make it next Friday. Also, ask her to send me a complete list of the gifts she has received to date, in chronological order."

The next day a letter came from Miss Quarich in reply to Valeska's note. She said that, as her butler was usually away on Fridays, she would prefer to have the dinner on Thursday. "And," she added, "do, please, bring that pretty Miss Wynne, if she will pardon my informality in not calling myself to invite her. But I'm so busy—" etc.

On Thursday evening, therefore, Astro's green car bore the two to Miss Quarich's residence on upper Madison Avenue. They were admitted by the smiling Japanese butler, and, entering the drawing-room, found the two men of the party already waiting.

Thompson, the elder of the two, was a typical man about town, bullet-headed, red-faced, with cropped red mustache, and of a jovial magnetic temperament. Care had scarcely rubbed elbows with Tom Thompson, and he was full of the gossip of the day, cordial, hearty, and evidently innocuous. Gerrish was more suave, with a clever head, egg-shaped, smooth shaved, with a sensitive mouth and smiling eyes.

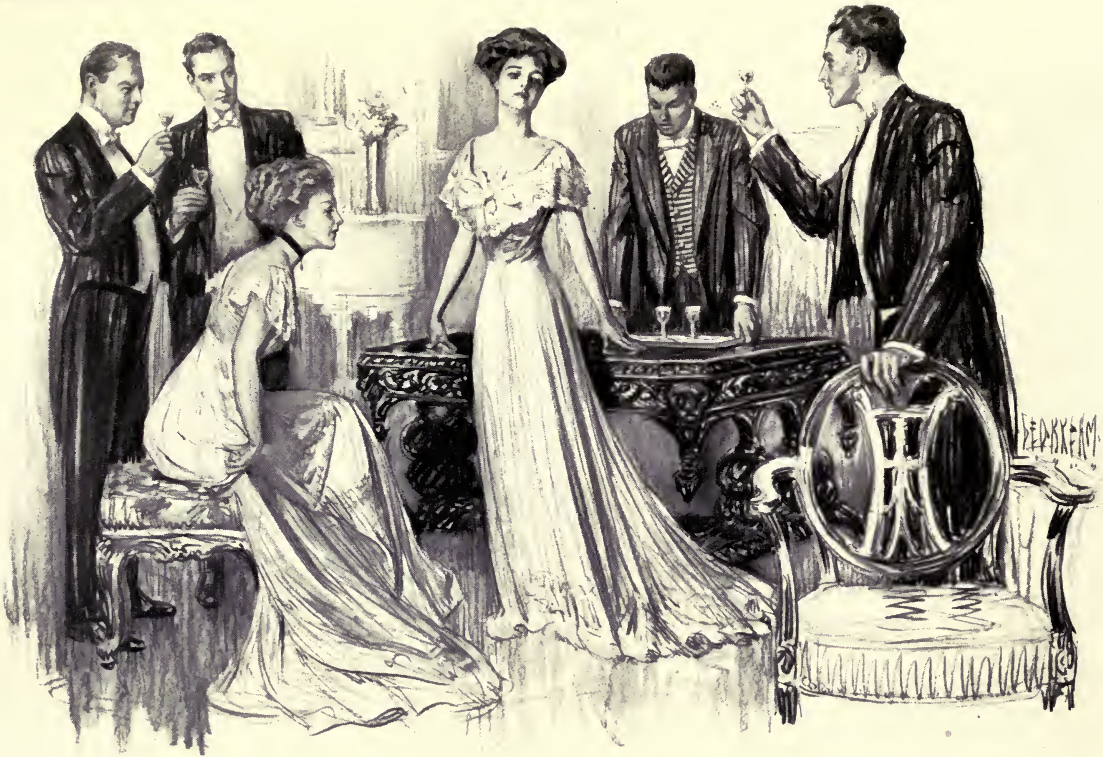
A moment after, Miss Quarich appeared, attired in the most modern of empire gowns, revealing her slim lithe figure and beautiful neck. She was young and merry, with dark eyes full of coquetry. She welcomed Valeska with a little patronizing snuggle, and held out her hand to Astro, who bent over it and kissed it gracefully. Then their eyes met, and Miss Quarich blushed. It became her charmingly. Valeska, meanwhile, had turned to the men, and her eyes and wits were busy. Sam, the Japanese butler, came in with cocktails on a tray. Neither of the women indulged; but the men drank their healths, each with a characteristic compliment. Then they went into the dining-room.

As Sam, with the crisp, impersonal, quiet dignity of his race, passed from one guest to another serving, both Astro and Valeska watched the company sharply. The Seer showed himself not only au fait, but distinguished, as always when he accepted such social invitations.

Once or twice, during the meal, Astro's eyes sought Valeska's, with a questioning expression. The faintest possible shake of the head was his only answer. The two men divided their attention between Miss Quarich and Valeska Wynne with discretion and tact. The talk ran on in social commonplaces, of the theaters, of the newspaper topics of the day, of sporting events. That Astro was anything more than the merest society butterfly, the favorite of the moment, no one would have suspected. Yet again and again he shot his shrewd look across the table at his assistant, and his glance in their secret language pointed her attention to many things.

After the sweets, the women retired up-stairs to Miss Quarich's private sitting-room for their coffee and a few moments of relaxation.

"Well?" said Miss Quarich, passing her golden cigarette case to Valeska.



Then their eyes met and Mrs. Quarich blushed.

"They're both immensely interested in you, it seems to me."

Miss Quarich's brows rose. "My dear," she said, "it struck me that *you* came in for some notice also."

Valeska smiled. "But I don't expect to receive a present from either of them on Saturday, however."

Miss Quarich sat up with animation. "It's great fun, of course," she said; "but it's tantalizing. I would never suspect either of them of being romantic. Of course I've had loads of flowers and books and all that sort of thing from men, and both these men have been, as you say, interested—and attentive. In fact, each of them has come dangerously near to—a refusal." She laughed merrily.

"Do you recall having mentioned the size of your shoe to either of them?"

"Not at all; though either might have found out, if he tried hard enough."

"And about the album?"

"Oh, I recall having mentioned one I saw, one night at dinner when they were both there. I must show it to you." She rang a bell at her side, and shortly a maid appeared. "Stebbins, will you bring that album on the table in my room, please?"

When it came, Valeska examined it interestedly. It was made in imitation of the Renaissance volumes that are still decorated and sold in Sienna. The board covers were gilded and painted with quaint pictures of knights and castles, and were bound with leather thongs, fastened with silver-headed nails. Inside were pages of tooled leather, with apertures for photographs. The slippers were also brought, of golden and blue embroidery of a quaint design. But, despite her close scrutiny, Valeska could find no distinguishing mark to hint at the place of their manufacture.

Miss Quarich handed them back finally to her maid. "Wrap them up neatly with the other things on my table, and give the parcel to Samugi. Tell him to give them to Monsieur Astro when he leaves the house. Now, my dear," Miss Quarich said, turning to pour out a cordial, "we must hurry down-stairs. We have been here long enough. I want to hear Astro read the hands of the two men. It ought to be fun. Oh, here's the list of presents up to date. You can give him that yourself."

Astro and Valeska left the house early and drove directly to the studio. She was animated with interest. The mystery was pretty enough to excite her feminine enthusiasm. Astro laughed at her but refused to discuss it till she had entered the studio and opened the paper Miss Quarich had given her, and displayed the whole collection of presents. The list was as follows:

November seventh, pair of slippers; November fourteenth, album; November twenty-first, volume of Montaigne; November twenty-eighth, umbrella; December fifth, six pairs of gloves.

Astro first handled the objects taken from the parcel, and then looked over the list. For ten minutes he said nothing, walking up and down the dim apartment in silence. For a few moments he stood by the window, staring out, thinking. Then, with a smile illuminating his countenance, he returned to the table, glanced again at the list of gifts, and chuckled.

"To-day is Thursday," he remarked. "The day after to-morrow, Miss Quarich will receive—can you guess what?"

"Of course I can't!" said Valeska. "What?"

He dropped his chin into his fist. "Well, she will receive a present of an inkstand; probably of cut glass."

"Really?" Valeska stared at him in amazement.

"Yes, unless he sends another book, which I think unlikely."

"He? Who?"

"Do you mean to say you don't know?"

"How can I? Why how can you, either? You haven't even examined the presents. There's that volume of Montaigne's *Essays*. It would be like Mr. Gerrish to send that; but more like Mr. Thompson to send the gloves. I'm all at sea."

Astro patted her familiarly on the shoulder. "After all my lessons?" he complained humorously. "Never mind, think it over. And look over that list again to-morrow, when you're rested."

The next day, however, brought no hint to Valeska, who, in the intervals of her work, examined the articles one by one, and pored over the list of presents. On Saturday, Miss Quarich rang up the studio. Valeska, in high excitement, listened, and then stared at Astro with a baffled expression.

"Miss Quarich received this morning a parcel containing a cut-glass ink-well!"

Astro laughed silently, and nodded.

For some time Valeska stood gazing at him with a blank look on her face. Then, without a word she went to the table, took up the list of gifts, and, as if mesmerized by Astro's unspoken thought, sat down, took a pencil and began to write:

Slippers
Album
Montaigne
Umbrella
Gloves
Inkstand

"What is that Japanese butler's name?" she demanded.

"Why, Sam, isn't it?"

"You know it isn't. It's Samugi. But how did you know? I only happened to hear Miss Quarich mention it."

"Well, I inquired. I often ask questions. So you've solved the acrostic?"

"Yes, the initials read 'Samugi,' of course. But what does it mean?"

Astro yawned. "It is difficult to interpret the oriental mind; almost as difficult as to understand feminine psychology. What did I tell you the other day? It's a mental knight's move, an indirect message. We'll have to wait."

"But fancy that Jap having the nerve to take such liberties with Miss Quarich!"

"That Japanese is, as I have succeeded in finding out at the consulate, more than Miss Quarich's social equal."

"But he's only a servant!"

"In New York, yes. In Tokio, he's a noble of an old Samurai family. His father is an army officer on General Oku's staff. So may Samugi be, for that matter."

"Then why is he taking a servile position here?"

"Oh, that is done very often. Who knows the reason? Not I, nor do I care. Perhaps he's an army spy, perhaps he's writing a sociological book on the American millionaires, perhaps he is sent by his government for private reasons. But most likely of all he is simply desperately in love with Miss Priscilla Quarich, and has taken this devious oriental method of pressing a hopeless suit."

"Hopeless?" Valeska's eyes snapped.

"Of course. The question now is, what are we to do about it? If Miss Quarich finds out, she, of course, will have him immediately discharged. The only thing is to wait till we get his message definitely."

Valeska tossed her head and walked away. "So you consider yourself an expert in the human heart, do you?" she asked jauntily, as she put on her furs.

"I confess I don't know much about yours," was his retort; and then, as he watched her out of the door he added slowly, "I wish to Heaven I did!"

Three weeks elapsed, Miss Quarich having been put off from day to day on one excuse or another. But each Saturday a new gift had been received. On December twelfth it had been an exquisite inlaid mother-of-pearl lorgnette. On the nineteenth she had received a magnificently-set opal, and the next week a huge box of violets arrived, fresh and fragrant from Morley's. The tenor of the message was now growing evident. According to the presents so far received, it read, "Samugi lov," and it needed little shrewdness to construct from that the probable declaration: "Samugi loves you."

The elegance and costliness of the gifts had already confirmed Astro's opinion of Samugi's condition. It was evident that he had not only birth and social position at home, but wealth as well. He had been shrewd enough to send nothing edible, such as confectionery, which might immediately arouse distrust. His tact was, indeed, most delicate. Should Priscilla Quarich disdain his advances, she need only pretend not to understand the acrostic. He was wise enough not to want to subject her to the embarrassment of refusing an overt offer, in case she should be prejudiced against the Orient. He actually did, it seemed, wish to be loved for himself alone, as the song has it, with no aid from his possession of noble birth.

It became, therefore, a delicate question as to how and when Miss Quarich should be informed of the solution of her problem. As she did not press for it, however, Astro let the matter wait a while, hoping to receive word from her of the gifts that might come. No letter came, however, and he expressed surprise to Valeska.

"I'm not at all surprised," she remarked.

"Please write to her for an account of what she has received since the violets came, and in what order," he said.

This Valeska did, and, in a few days, received the following answer:

> "My Dear Astro—I had almost forgotten that I had asked you to unravel my little mystery, and I'm afraid now that it is hardly worth your while

> spending much time on it. As you ask, however, I'll tell you that I have received, since I telephoned about the violets, a copy of *Undine*, an emerald, a pair of opera-glasses, and some other things. Please don't bother about it. It really doesn't matter much. Yours sincerely,
>
> "PRISCILLA QUARICH."

Astro whistled. "I confess I don't know what to make of that," he exclaimed; "but at least it confirms my original prophecy. She hasn't given us all the letters, nor their correct order; but what she does give certainly fill in right. He took a pencil and wrote a line as follows:

"Samugi lov . . . ou."

"But why this sudden lack of interest in the solution of the problem?" he demanded. "Do you suppose that she can have puzzled it out for herself; that perhaps she's so ashamed of it she doesn't want me to know the truth?"

Valeska burst out into a laugh. "I saw Miss Quarich in a cab driving up Lexington Avenue this afternoon," she said; and added slyly, "with a man."

"Thompson, or Gerrish?" said Astro.

"It is Friday, isn't it?" she inquired demurely.

Astro sprang up. "By Jove! Samugi's day off! You don't mean to say she was with Samugi?"

"In a top hat," Valeska added with mirth; "which shows all *you* know about the human heart. I thought she looked at him rather soulfully that first day at the dinner. Only, I wanted to see what you knew of women."

"Less and less, every day," said he, with a mock mournful look.

The next Monday's paper contained an account of Miss Priscilla Quarich's elopement with her Japanese butler. Samugi's history was given, however, and it was one partly to reconcile the gossips with the scandal of the affair. His noble family, his war record, his academic achievements, all received sensational description. Society exclaimed, shrugged its shoulders, and forgot the affair next week. Astro's bill was paid with a yellow porcelain lion of an ancient dynasty, one of the seven left in the world.

Valeska's birthday came that week. She was in the studio when an expressman entered with a big basket filled with parcels all addressed to her. She opened them first with glee, then with increasing anxiety on her face. When the last package had been unwrapped and the papers carefully put away, she spent some time sitting on the floor gazing at the thirteen several gifts. If there were tears in her eyes, Astro came too late to see them. He did not enter the studio, in fact, until after she had arranged the presents into three rows, in this way.

Astrakhan furs
Slippers
Thimble
Ruby ring
Orchids
Lorgnette
Opal pin
Violets
Emerald brooch
Sash
Yeats' Poems
Opera-glasses
Umbrella

At the sound of his step in the outer hall, however, she swept the gifts together in a heap and jumped to her feet.

"Well," he said, as he entered, "I wish you a happy new year, my dear!"

She was still blushing. "Oh," she said, "I've just got so many beautiful, wonderful presents! They're simply lovely; but I can't understand why they were all sent to me at once." She looked away.

"And no idea where they came from, either, I suppose?"

She cast down her eyes. "I suppose only an Oriental would be so munificent—and so mysterious. And I'm sure of one thing—that my Oriental's presents have brought me even more delight than hers did to Priscilla!"

THE HEIR TO SOOTHOID

THE mellow barytone of Astro's voice vibrated through the great studio with a note of profound mystery, as he read aloud from Anna Hempstead Branch's poem, *The Pilgrim:*

"Touch me not, mother, who art thou,
 To lay a hand on me?
My soul was driven through sun and moon
 Ere I was come to thee!"

Then he dropped the book and gazed at Valeska, his assistant, for a while thoughtfully. She was sitting on the floor, propped up by gorgeous cushions, playing with a huge piece of rock-crystal cut in the form of a tetrahedron. A shaft of light fell on her lap, piercing the obscurity of the apartment. The crystal caught and gathered the rays, then broke them, shattering the white light into streaks of brilliant color. At the other end of the room a spot of radiance appeared on the ceiling, splendid with the hues of a rainbow. She looked up to the Master as he ceased reading.

"There's the poet's immemorial challenge to the monist," he said, almost in a reverie. "It's a cry as old as the world, and, I think, idealistic as it is, mystic as it is, with as sure a foundation as that of modern determinism. But this is modern, too. It voices an idea that, though it has long been common to oriental thought, is new to the western civilizations. What relation, after all, is the son to the father? See how sublimely Miss Branch herself answers that passionate question:

"If thou came out of the moon and star
I plucked thee forth by my desire.
I can hold thee burning in my hand!
It was my hand that shaped the fire!"

Astro rose, and, as was his custom when absorbed in any subject, began to walk up and down the room. His keen dark eyes stared straight in front of him without looking at the priceless decorations of the studio. His hands were clasped behind his back across his red silken robe. His turban nodded as he spoke. Valeska watched him eagerly. These philosophic moods, alternating with the active eager phases of his mind, when he was pursuing the track of some almost insoluble mystery, fascinated her. It was at such times, she thought, that he betrayed his real self.

"There's the purely transcendental side," he said. "But the materialistic miracle is as marvelous,—the fact that protoplasm is immortal, that characteristics, physical and mental, are handed down in the infinitesimal cell that persists from generation to generation in the id and the biophore. Tricks of speech and gesture, abnormal formations of the organs of the body, temper, emotion,—all transmitted in that tiny primordial atom! What has science done but induce us to believe the impossible?"

A bronze clock in the anteroom pealed out the hour of ten, preceded by the Westminster chime of four staves of music. Valeska rose, but hesitated, unwilling to interrupt the Seer's soliloquy. But he threw off his absorbed mood, came back to her, and smiled.

"Well," he said, "one must earn one's living. What's on for to-day?"

"You have an appointment with Colonel Mixter at ten."

"Very well. When he comes, show him in. I shall now give an imitation of an oriental adept of the Fifth Circle. Pass me the crystal ball, Valeska, and touch off that incense in the Japanese burner. Am I properly sedate and scornful? Bah! What rubbish it all is—and how it goes with the mob!"

He took his favorite position on the couch, drew up his narghile, and assumed a picturesque attitude. Valeska left him and took her place in the reception-room. In ten minutes she ushered in Colonel Mixter, bowed, and left the two together, dropping the black velvet portières behind her. She did not, however, remain in the reception-room. Instead, she passed into a room connecting that with the studio, where in a combination of mirrors she could see all that happened and also hear the talk.

The new client was a military-looking man of some fifty years, with iron-gray hair and a curling white mustache. He had an active air, full of strength and character and showing his habit of command. Scrupulously dressed, immaculately clean, well groomed from head to heels, he was what might have been called both handsome and distinguished in appearance. His voice was crisp and hearty.

"May I smoke?" he asked. "Dashed if I can talk without smoking! I have to treat my confounded nerves like a confounded pack of dogs, confound it! Thanks."

In reply, Astro had drawn up his water-pipe and inhaled a long whiff of the aromatic Russian tobacco that smoldered in the bowl. The colonel produced a cigar, bit off the end, and lighted it.

"I suppose you've seen the advertisements of 'Soothoid,' that chewing-gum stuff, all over the town, haven't you?" he began.

Astro nodded gravely.

"Biggest fake on earth," said the colonel, "and the most remunerative. My old uncle invented it, you know. Conceived the brilliantly vile idea of doping ordinary chicle with a tincture of opium and making chewing-gum of it. 'It soothes the nerves,'—I should say it did!—'Children cry for it,' and all that sort of thing! It's monstrous, of course. It ought to be suppressed by law, and it's only a question of time when this pure-food agitation will knock it out of business. It's a crime against civilization; but all the same it has made four millions for that disreputable old uncle of mine, and now the whole works belong to me. Brings me in eighteen thousand a year. I'm afraid to stop it, and more afraid not to. But that's not the point."

He rolled his cigar from one corner of his mouth to another, flicked a fleck of dust from his spotless trousers, and looked calmly at Astro. The Seer smiled, despite himself, waved his hand dispassionately for the other to proceed, and waited.

"The thing is this," the colonel went on. "I'm an expert on ordnance, and I've traveled all over the world for the government. Never at home from one year's end to another. I came back to find myself immensely rich, last October, and at the same time up against a mystery that it's practically impossible to solve. So I come to you. Understand?"

"Scarcely, as yet," said the Master. "Kindly go on."

"Why, see here. I have a son—or thought I had. Query: Is he my son at all? And if not, who is to inherit the 'Soothoid' millions? That's the question I have to decide right away. I have angina pectoris. I'm likely to die any fine day. I don't want a chap that's no relative of mine to get away with all that money, do I?"

"My dear Colonel," said Astro, "you'll have to give me more information than that, before I decide such a weighty question for you. What do you mean by saying you don't know whether he's your son or not. You mean you suspect—"

The colonel roared. "Oh, lord, no, not that!" he exclaimed. "This is no question of matrimonial infelicity, you know. I'm the father of a child, all right; only, the question is, what child?" He put it very gravely.

"Tell me the whole story." Astro's brows bent on his client.

"Well, then, see here. When the child was born, my wife was in a hospital on Long Island. I wanted her to have the very best of care, especially as I had to be away so much. Well, the night her child was born, the hospital took fire. It spread so quickly that they couldn't get the patients out fast enough. The doctors working over my wife didn't dare leave her, and they worked against time. Just after they finished with her and another case of the same kind, the wing caught, and there was barely time to hustle every one downstairs and outside. Do you see the situation? They had to work quick. Those surgeons showed all sorts of nerve, I can tell you. But in the confusion the two babies were somehow mixed up by the nurse. One was a boy, and one was a girl, born within three minutes of each other. But which was my child, the boy or the girl? That's how it stands. You see, at the time nothing was said to me about any uncertainty. My wife died from the shock; so did the other woman. The boy was given to me as my baby. I never suspected that there was any doubt about it, and have brought him up and educated him as my son."

"But when did you first suspect that he wasn't?" Astro asked.

"Only a month ago. The former nurse told the whole thing. Said it was on her conscience, and had been for years; so much so that she had kept track of both children. The little girl was put in an orphan asylum, as no one came to claim her; then she was adopted by a family in Newark; and now she's a salesgirl at Bloom's candy store. Working behind a counter at six a week, by Jove! and may be my daughter, and the heir to 'Soothoid'! What do you think of that? Wouldn't *you* worry?" He shoved his hands into his pockets and regarded the Master of Mysteries.

"The nurse isn't sure which is which?"

"No. It has been tormenting her conscience for twenty years, and she had to make a clean breast of it. All she knows is that she 'mixed those babies up'; like Little Buttercup in *Pinafore*. So I've come to you. Doctors say it positively can't be proved, either way. I thought you might do it by the palms or crystals or something. I've seen 'em do some great stunts in India, and I believe there is something in this occult business. They tell me you have a pretty good record for that sort of thing here in New York."

The Seer waved his hand modestly. "Does the boy resemble you in any way?" he asked.

"Why, he does and he doesn't. You know the way things like that go. I've been told I look like everybody under the sun. I suppose I'm a type. Well, he is, too. Sometimes I think he's like me, and then I doubt it. There's one funny thing, though. We both of us sleep with our thumbs curled up inside our fists. Then he has a second toe longer than his great toe, and so have I. They tell me that's rare. My father had it too, though. He has blue eyes, and so have I. Red hair, though, and there's no trace of that in my family or my wife's, that I know of."

"And the girl—have you seen her?" Astro inquired.

"Of course. Went right down there immediately, and found her behind the counter—selling 'Soothoid,' by Jove! Big pompadour, rats in her hair, brass bangles, and all. What do you expect for six a week, though? If she's my daughter, she'll soon learn how to act the part, don't you worry!"

Astro laughed again. "She hasn't been spoken to about it, I hope?"

"Oh, lord, no! What do you take me for? I wouldn't have her building air castles for the world. I only bought a pound of cheap chocolates and talked to her a little. I've no doubt the poor girl thought I was trying to mash her. She was a nice little thing, though, for all her rats. I liked her, by Jove! I'd like to do something for her in any case, daughter or not. Her name is Miss Maverick."

"Does she resemble you or your wife?"

"Why, the funny part of it is that she does, in a far-away sort of fashion. I noticed that she was left-handed, too, like me. Blue eyes; but her hair was hennaed, so I couldn't tell about that. Cute little thing, she is. Confound it! I did like her immensely, at first sight."

"Well," said the Seer, after reflecting a while, "I must confess that you have set a difficult problem for me. But I think that it can be determined through astral means. No doubt you have consulted some medium already?"

"Oh, they're all a lot of fakers! They told me that the boy was mine and that the girl was, too, both."

"I agree with you. The ordinary mediums are an ignorant and unscrupulous lot. I have occult methods unknown except in the Himalayas. But it will be difficult, I am afraid. But may I ask you what is the matter with your eyes, Colonel?"

The colonel stared. "My eyes? Nothing except a slight astigmatism. I have some glasses; but I seldom wear them. Why?"

"They seem peculiar to me. You know that the eye has been called the 'window of the soul'. The phrase is trite; but it contains a germ of truth. I can tell a great deal from the eye, as much as from the palm or the voice. If you don't mind, I'd like to examine yours with the ophthalmoscope. My methods are my own; but I don't hesitate to make use of the instruments known to modern science. After all, the ophthalmoscope merely enables one to see through the cornea into the retina and the optic plexus."

With that he called in Valeska, who darkened the great studio. Then she turned on a single electric lamp which had a blue-glass bulb. The thread of incandescent wire showed purple. Then, attaching his instrument to the wires, he went up to the colonel and peered through the little slit in the holder. He gazed for some moments in silence, then switched on the lights again.

"Now," he added, "I have to make a request that may seem absurd. You may have heard of divination by moles. It is an almost unknown art; but, while not absolute, there is much to be learned from the relative disposition of such marks on the human body. Casanova, you may recall, if you have read his memoirs, practised the art, and had a theory regarding the symmetrical distribution of moles. For instance, if one has a mole on the right cheek, there is a probability that there will be another to correspond with it on the left hip. We are tracing, you understand, mere physical heredity. That is all you require, I believe. The relation of souls is far beyond our ken."

"That's true," said the colonel. "People often seem to bear no spiritual relationship to their parents."

"Where the soul comes from will probably always remain unsettled by modern science," Astro agreed. "It is one of the world questions that even Haeckel gave up. Our oriental philosophers have their explanation; but for that one has to know the whole lore of the Vedantic sacred books. But there are laws that govern the transmission of physical characteristics. Now, therefore, if you will kindly step into this room and remove your clothes, I shall chart your birthmarks and compare them with your horoscope."

Ten minutes later the Seer joined Valeska in the studio. In his hand was a little diagram, an outline of the human form shown in four positions, from the front and back, the right and left sides. Little crosses were marked where the moles on the colonel's body appeared. He handed it to his assistant with a wink, and she left immediately. The colonel came in soon after, as faultlessly dressed as ever, and, after a few more questions from Astro, was permitted to take his leave.

"Now," said Astro, when he was again alone with Valeska, "you have a delicate piece of detective work to do. Do you think you can get a position in Bloom's confectionery store and scrape up an acquaintance with Miss Maverick?"

"I shall be delighted to try," was her reply. "I suppose I'll earn six dollars a week at it, won't I?"

"Colonel Mixter is worth millions. I expect it will pay you pretty well."

"Besides being lots of fun!" Valeska's eyes shone. "But, really, it seems to me that there's a much simpler way of settling the question. Why not marry young Mixter to Miss Maverick? Then, whoever is the true heir, he or she'll have the use of the money."

"That is exactly what I propose to do. It's the only solution possible. Heredity can't be proved by any method known to modern science, of course; but we'll have to make three persons believe that it can. I believe I can convince them all. At any rate, it's as pretty a task as the other, and you ought to be able to manage it, if any one can."

"Oh, you can't make a person fall in love so easily as that!" said Valeska, turning away.

"I think *you* could make any one fall in love," he answered, gazing at her.

For a while there was silence between them. Then with apparent effort, he took up the subject they had left.

"The evidence is pretty equally balanced between the two," he said. "The son curls in his thumb in his sleep; but many do that. The same with the long second toe. Both have blue eyes; so that's no test. The girl affects him mentally, or spiritually; but that's merely sentimental evidence. Her sinistrality, of course, amounts to nothing, nor does the faint resemblance he remarked to himself. We have to have some positive physical abnormality in order to appear to prove heredity. Mere probability doesn't count."

"How about finger prints?" Valeska asked.

"We know little of that. We have no records of hereditary transmission in that direction. It's too bad."

"What was the ophthalmoscope test for? And why all that patter of moles and birthmarks?"

"A mere shot in the air! Do you know what I brought down, though? The colonel has an optic disk —that's where the optic nerve comes into the retina— of a most peculiar shape, like an angel's wings. I just stumbled on it, in the hope of finding something peculiar that wouldn't appear to any observer. Also, he has a curious red birthmark of almost the same shape on his left shoulder. I saw it when I was pretending to diagram the moles. Now what we have to do is to examine both youngsters in some way. You'll have to patch up a friendship with the girl, Miss Maverick, while I investigate the boy. His father will help in that. I'll fix it: Have a doctor's sign painted on the door of my laboratory, and with the father's directions, medically inspect the lad for life insurance. That's easy. If we find one of the stigmata, the proof will be strong enough. Should we find two, it may be called positive certainty."

A week afterward found Valeska behind the counter at Bloom's, dressed in white, with a pompadour as big as any of those in the shop, selling candy and soda-water. Her bare arms were heavy with bracelets, her language was slangy and facetious. Her companion at the counter was Miss Maverick, known to the other employees as Bessie. It did not take Valeska long to create a friendship.

Bessie was a demure little miss, who did not by any means tell all she knew to a chance acquaintance. But Valeska asked no questions. Her conversation was a monologue, apparently artless, but cleverly contrived to throw the most suspicious off her guard. She asked Bessie's advice on this and that; she fished for Bessie's compliments; she gave Bessie hardly a chance for a word. A week went by without a move in the desired direction. Then Valeska came to the shop with a tale of misfortune,—of a lost purse and other pathetic details. Bessie offered to share her own room with her. From that moment all was easy. Valeska gradually talked less; Bessie gradually talked more. The two soon became real friends.

Valeska's first report to Astro was sensational. "What do you think?" she announced, "Bessie knows all about the 'Soothoid' affair, and the colonel, and even the colonel's son! One of those mediums gave the whole thing away to her, and tried to get her to stand in with him to claim the heirship of the estate. But she's the squarest little brick in the world, Bessie is! She's a dear; she's pure gold! She has looked up the colonel's business herself, and is all ready to fall in love with the colonel's son, just for himself alone. It's going to be easier than I thought."

"But how about the birthmarks?" Astro inquired.

"Oh, you've no idea how hard it was to find that out, till she had a little touch of rheumatism. Then I offered to rub liniment on her back, and—well, she has a birthmark, something the shape of what you said, an angel's wings."

"What?" Astro cried.

"It's true. And how about Willie Mixter?"

"Well, he has a birthmark, too," said Astro.

Valeska burst into a laugh. "Thereby proving that the earth is round, or something like that, doesn't it? Well, what to do now, I don't see."

"You forget the ophthalmoscope."

"Have you looked at Willie's eyes?"

"Yes, and his optic disk is the ordinary, irregular circle."

"Oh, I'm so glad! Then there's a chance for Bessie's making good for the 'Soothoid' millions."

"If you can get her up here for me to examine her eyes."

"But what if, after all, I can make the match without?"

"Oh, I spoke to the colonel about that. He'd be delighted. He really has taken a fancy to Bessie."

"Then Willie must see her."

"I agree. And I've been thinking that in any case Willie should be told. If he loses his money, he'll have to know, anyway. And I see no reason why he shouldn't know now. He's really a fine chap, a gentleman in every sense of the word. If I know anything of psychology, the thing will appeal to him as immensely romantic."

It was with the keenest interest, therefore, that Valeska, three days later, saw Willie Mixter enter Bloom's, cast his eyes about the shop, and walk toward the counter behind which Bessie Maverick stood. She saw Bessie blush; but the conversation was too low to be overheard. When the time came for the girls to leave the shop, instead of Bessie's accompanying Valeska to their room, she excused herself and went off alone. Valeska followed at a discreet distance. In five minutes she saw Willie Mixter overtake Bessie, and the two walked off like old friends.

The next day he came in again. Valeska asked no questions. Bessie had grown reserved. But she did not go this night, either, to the little dairy place where the two girls usually took their dinner. So it went on for another week, Bessie seeing the rich young fellow two or three times.

That next Sunday, as the two girls sat in their little room on East Nineteenth Street, Bessie began to cry. Valeska's arm was about her neck immediately, and, through her sobs, Bessie came out with the whole story.

"He wants to marry me!" she confessed. "And I love him so much that I won't! I know it's all on account of this miserable money, and he only wants to be fair with me, and divide. I simply can't accept him on that account! He'd think, anyway, I was after him on account of his money, even if I didn't think he was after me only because of his conscience. It's hopeless, my dear, hopeless! I hope I'll die and end it that way! I wish I might never see a package of 'Soothoid' again as long as I live!"

"Oh, of course you'll marry him!" Valeska said. "I'm sure he's in love with you."

"He is not! He talks all the time about our dividing the money; so I'm sure he only wants to arrange it like one of those royal family complications I've read about. I've got to tell some one!" she went on. "I'm breaking my heart with it. I have no mother and no father," here she broke off to stare wildly at Valeska, "unless the colonel *is* my father; and so I tell you! Oh, dear! it can *never* be settled! That's the horrible part of it. If that horrid old nurse had only been more careful of us!" and she laughed through her tears hysterically. "What shall I do, Valeska, what shall I do?"

"Do you really want my advice?" Valeska asked.

Bessie snuggled closer to her friend.

"I have a friend," Valeska said slowly, "a man whom I know you can trust. He is the wisest person in the world, it seems to me. He has been my friend a long time. He saved me from what was worse than death."

"Are you in love with him?" Bessie interrupted.

Valeska ignored the remark. "He is a palmist and an astrologer, and I used to work for him. He has solved some of the most astonishing mysteries in this city. He is continually doing good. You can be sure of him."

"What must I do?" Bessie demanded.

"He knows all about you," said Valeska. "The colonel has told him everything, and Astro, my friend, has agreed to help solve the problem. I know I can trust you, when I tell you this. I want you to see him and ask his advice."

"I will!" Bessie rose with determination. "I'll just leave it all to him. He can't make it any worse than to tell me that I'm not the colonel's daughter, and then that will settle it. Let's go and call on him now."

Astro looked up in surprise when he saw the two girls enter the studio. A secret glance from Valeska told him the truth. He nodded, and welcomed the visitor.

"I've told her everything," said Valeska. "She can be trusted. You will take my word for it, I know. And she's ready for the ophthalmoscope test."

"Is it really a proof?" Bessie asked timidly.

"My dear girl," said Astro, "if your optic disk shows itself to be the ordinary circle, nothing whatever will be proved, and the chances are equal as between you and Willie. If, on the contrary it appears like your father's—I mean the colonel's—it will be ten thousand to one that you are descended from him; that you are, in fact, his daughter. Now, Valeska, put down the lights and light the blue bulb."

The room became dim and full of shadows. The incandescent wire of the electric lamp showed a rich purple. Astro took up the instrument, placed it in front of Miss Maverick's eyes and stared through the aperture.

"Come here, Valeska!"

He handed her the ophthalmoscope, adjusted it, and bade her look. Valeska gazed into the retina of Bessie's eye. At first she could distinguish nothing. Slowly she perceived the warm pink back of the eye, and in the center a ruddy spot. It was the optic disk —shaped like an angel's wings! She dropped the instrument and clasped Bessie in her arms.

"Bessie Mixter!" she exclaimed.

"No!" Bessie jumped up, staring. For a moment she stood silent, then she grasped Astro's hand.

"Oh, you won't tell him, will you?" she pleaded. "Promise me you won't ever, *ever* let him know! I don't *want* the money! I want Willie to have it, as he's always had it! Don't let him ever, ever know!"

"But it's yours!" Valeska exclaimed.

"I don't care. Don't you understand, Valeska?"

"You mean—"

"Yes!" Bessie cast down her eyes.

"Then you'll marry him, now you know that the money's rightfully yours?"

Bessie drew herself up. "Of course!" she said. "Wouldn't you?"

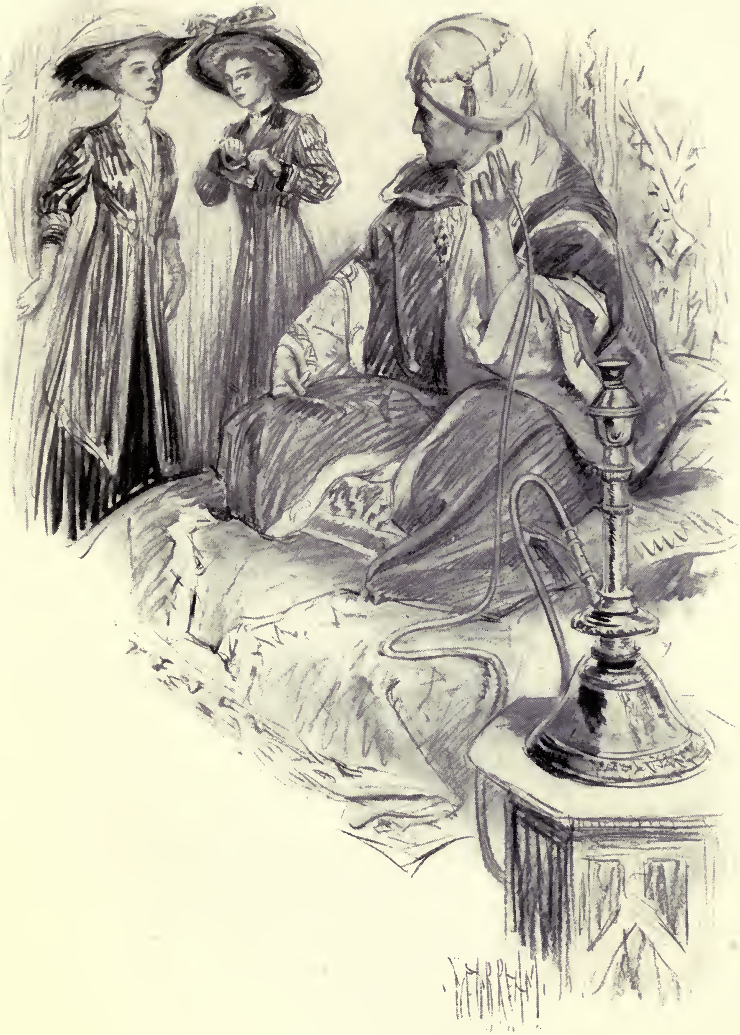
"It's too much for me," said Astro.

"That," said Valeska, "is because you are only a man."

"I know I'm supposed not to know anything about love," he said gloomily.

"Nothing at all!" Valeska's tone was decisive.

"And I'll have a father after all!" cried Bessie. "That's the best part of it! I've wanted a father all



“Now Valeska, put down the lights and light the blue bulb.”

my life. And," she added, "he'll never know, by the way I treat him, that he's missed anything by not having a truly daughter!" She walked toward the telephone. "I'm going to ring up Willie right now," she announced.

Astro watched her keenly. "It would be rather pleasant to have a daughter like that," he muttered to himself, and walked into the laboratory with a thoughtful scowl.

THE TWO MISS MANNINGS

"BE careful, Valeska, don't joggle my arm, now!" said Astro.

They were in the small laboratory that led off the great studio. Here the Seer pursued his studies in physics, chemistry, and pathology. Here he had his microscope, over which he spent most of his leisure. Here, now, he stood before the window, dressed in a linen suit, holding to the light a corked test-tube.

Valeska waited, smiling, ready for a new marvel, a new philosophic theory, some shrewd comment on human nature, or what other thought had sprung from the Master's prolific brain. She looked over his shoulder, letting her chin touch it, even; though she did not often permit herself such intimacy as this.

He did not turn his head. Instead, without speaking he unstopped the tube gently. Immediately in the glass cylinder a tiny miracle appeared. A white ray sprang from the bottom of the colorless liquid. It divided and subdivided, branching in a dozen directions; and as she looked it grew rapidly, until the interior of the vessel was filled as if by magic with a feathery delicate mass of crystals.

"Oh! How very beautiful—how wonderful!" she gasped.

He put the tube into her hand and sat down on the table.

"The tree of Paracelsus," he remarked. "In the olden time it was accounted magic. With that simple experiment with sodium sulphate dukes and kings may have been beguiled, fortunes won, the lives of great men changed. Those were the palmy days for charlatans, Valeska. It paid well to be an alchemist in the Middle Ages; that is, if you escaped being put to death for it."

As she handed back the tube, he gazed on it thoughtfully for a moment; and then, holding it over a Bunsen burner, warmed the tube. In a few moments the crystals began to melt. The tree shrank and disappeared. He gave it a shake, and the solution was transparent again. He set it in a rack and smiled.

Valeska waited, knowing that this was not mere amusement. It was like him to wait for her to fathom, if she could, what he was thinking. But his mind surpassed hers; she could only follow him at times, though oftener than at first. Here she had no clue.

"It's a moral lesson," he said. "It is a parable of human nature and its mysteries. Why do we become absolutely different persons when we are angry? I am, we'll say, like this clear solution, hermetically sealed from the atmosphere of strife. Open the cork, or drop in a crystal of anger. Immediately, without apparent reason, I am changed; but not so beautifully as this. Warm this tree of acrid bitterness that has sprung up, and I melt into good nature again. Reading Paracelsus, the analogy came into my mind. Thus endeth the first lesson."

And, so saying, he stripped off his working clothes, attired himself in gown and turban, and, as he changed his costume, became again the inscrutable calm Seer, ready for his patrons. He walked into the dim studio, took a gyroscope from a tabouret and spun it on a little standard.

Valeska's look followed him. His eyes questioned her. She drew down her fair brows and watched the toy, supported seemingly immune from the power of gravitation as it revolved slowly in its orbit, its wheel flying too fast, too silently, for its motion to be perceived.

She spoke timidly. "Human emotions—the downward pull—governed and held in equilibrium by—"

"The trained mind, the intellect," he suggested. "Very well, Valeska. Very well, indeed! You're coming on." He yawned. "Well, now for work! It's dangerous pushing analogies too far."

"Well, about that young man who came yesterday?"

"Oh, yes. I didn't have time to see him. Besides, it's time you were taking some cases off my hands, and he didn't seem too anxious. I know you prefer men to women." He watched her from the tail of his eye.

"I don't!" she protested, blushing.

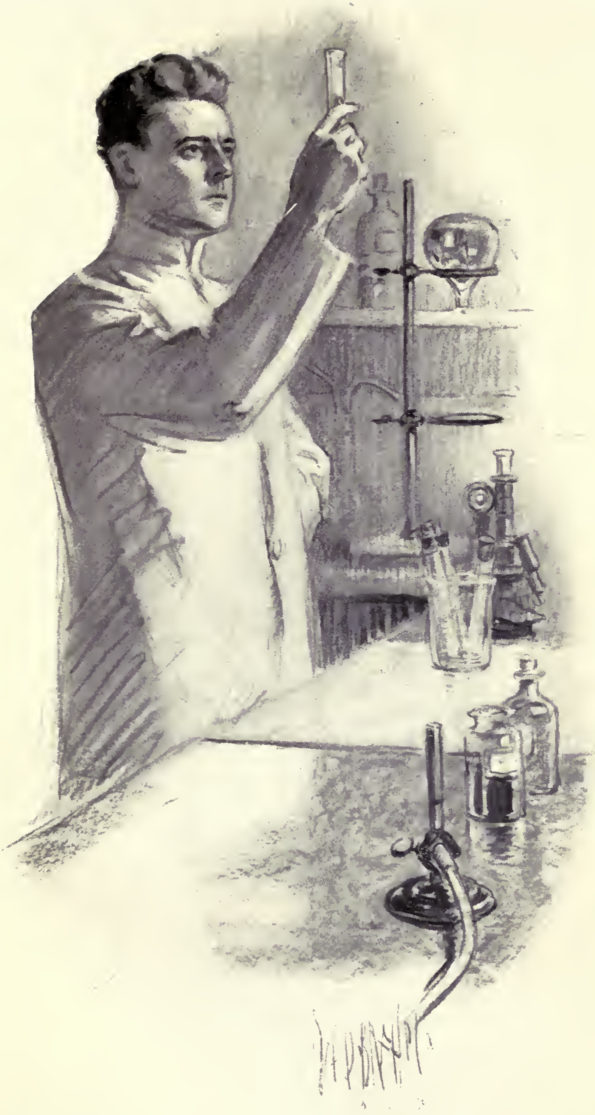
Astro seemed pleased. "Well, it's agreeable for them, at any rate. What was the story?"

"Why, it's most romantic! It's perfectly ridiculous, though! He wants you to find a strange woman whom he saw on the subway."

"Why strange?"

"Oh, strange enough in every way. And it's a hard problem, too."

"First, who is he?"



"The 'Tree of Paracelsus,'" he remarked. "In the olden times it was accounted magic."

"He's a Mr. Jenson, and he said to ring him up at Madison 2995 between nine and two o'clock. Those are banking hours. And I found out the number was that of the Sixth Avenue National."

"Very good. Go on."

"Well, yesterday at four o'clock, he took a local in the subway at Twenty-third Street. Between Twenty-eighth Street and Thirty-third, an up-town express passed him. You know how, sometimes, two trains keep side by side for a short distance, exactly even, and then the express shoots ahead?"

"Yes. I've often thought of complications arising from two passengers watching each other."

"Which is exactly what happened. Directly opposite his window was a beautiful girl sitting in the express. She seemed fearfully agitated, and looked at him strangely; almost as if she recognized him, though he's sure he has never seen her before. But he had another sort of feeling—an emotion—as if somehow she was something to him,—one might call it a sudden feeling of affinity,—a real love at first sight."

"Oh, in the circumstances she felt safe enough to flirt with him, I suppose."

"Oh, that's impossible; for it seemed evident that she didn't feel safe at all,—in fact that she was in a great danger, and was so distressed that she made a mute appeal to him for help."

"Why to *him?*"

"To him, he thinks, perhaps too sentimentally, because she, too, felt the mysterious affinity,—whatever it is, trust in him, or something. And she asked him to help her."

Astro stared. "Asked him! How, pray? She had only a few moments, and I suppose the windows were shut. They always are, even in summer."

"Yes; but she was really clever. She had a newspaper in her hand. On the front page were the headlines. Here, I have a yesterday's paper."

She took up a copy of the *Gazette* and pointed to the scare-head, "Tammany Will Help Push the New Viaduct," in such a way that only the word "Help" was evident.

"Then," Valeska continued, "she gave him a number, 3324, one digit at a time, on her fingers."

"I see. And Mr. Jenson, I suppose, wants to know the lady's name and address, and what she wanted?"

"Exactly. Of course the number was that of her house; but what street?"

Astro snapped his fingers impatiently. "It was her telephone number. Didn't she make any sign to show the central?"

"Why, just as she got to the 4, the train she was in swept out of sight as his slowed up at the Thirty-third-Street station."

Astro thought for a while. Finally he said, "Take the telephone book and make a list of all the exchanges, first thing. Then we'll have to use our pull with the company to find out the names and addresses of all the 3324's, and send men to investigate. It's merely a question of elimination then. But the question is, what was the matter? That requires thought. What happened yesterday? I suppose you've finished all the papers?"

"Yes; but there was nothing that seemed important to me."

"Then I'll have to look over the files myself. What a bore!"

He went into the waiting-room and began listlessly to turn the sheets. He had not gone far before Valeska heard a low whistle. Running up to him, she saw him reading a news item under the following headings: "Aged Woman Killed in Subway Station. Run Over by Down-town Express After Falling on Track in View of Crowd."

"Look at that!" he exclaimed. "This happened at a quarter to three o'clock yesterday. The mysterious lady might easily have been at the Fourteenth-Street station at the time of the accident."

"And what does that prove?"

"Nothing yet! but it's a chance for a clue; a queer coincidence, at any rate. I'll take a think, when I have leisure."

He went back to the studio, and, after he had finished reading the palm of his first client, Valeska entered with the list:

Audubon
Barclay
Beekman
Broad
Bryant
Chelsea
City Island
Columbus
Cortland
Franklin
Gramercy
Hanover
Harlem
John
Kingsbridge
Lenox
Madison Sq.
Marble
Melrose
Morning Side
Murray Hill
Orchard
Plaza
Rector
Riverside
Schuyler
Spring
Stuyvesant
Tremont
Westchester
Williamsbridge
Worth

Astro glanced it over, and penciled it as he talked. "We'll first strike out all the stations obviously not in the residence districts where the lady would be likely to live. We may leave out Beekman, Barclay, Broad, City Island, Franklin, Cortland, John, Hanover, Orchard, Rector, and Worth. That leaves us still nineteen numbers to investigate. Now, if the young lady wanted help badly enough to appeal to a casual stranger, and for that purpose tried to communicate her telephone number, it must have been that she was going directly home, and wanted a quick reply. As she was on a subway express at Thirty-third Street, then it couldn't have been either of the Chelsea, Gramercy, Madison Square, Spring, or Stuyvesant districts. The subway does not go near the Harlem, Melrose, Lenox, Tremont, Westchester, or Williamsbridge sections. Let's see, then, what is left: Audubon, Bryant, Columbus, Kingsbridge, Morningside, Riverside, and Murray Hill. Ring up Mr. Potter in the advertising department of the telephone company, and tell him I'd like to find the names and addresses of number 3324 in each of those seven exchanges."

Valeska left the studio on this errand, and, as no client appeared, Astro picked up his Paracelsus and went on with his reading. He had finished the chapter on *Aqueous Vapors* when she returned. He took up her memorandum and looked it over. The Audubon and Kingsbridge addresses he eliminated, for the present, these being apartment-houses with private exchanges. The *Social Register* enabled him to identify the persons in the Morningside, Plaza, and Riverside districts. There were left only three addresses, as follows:

(Bryant, 3324) H. J. Cook, 199 West Forty-fifth Street.
(Columbus, 3324) Peter J. Manning, 521 West Seventy-third Street.

(Murray Hill, 3324) Alpheus Hardy, 118 East Thirty-sixth Street.

"Well," he said, "the last one, Hardy, must go, because if she were going to East Thirty-sixth Street, the lady would have taken a local to Thirty-third-Street station. To-morrow we'll see what we can find out about the Cooks and Mannings. We'll see if my theory is correct. You have a description of the girl, I suppose?"

"Such as it is, not much; though he'd know her, of course, if he saw her again. He was too busy trying to take her message to have noticed or recalled much. He did say she wore chinchilla furs, though, had reddish hair, and either a scar or a deep dimple in her chin."

"I hope it's a dimple," said Astro, taking up his Paracelsus.

Valeska pouted, shook her fist at him, and retired.

The next morning a man purporting to be an agent of the New York Directory Company called at 199 West Forty-fifth Street and asked many questions. He had an affable way with him that quite won the heart of the maid who answered the door. She denied, however, that there was any young woman living in the house, which belonged to H. J. Cook.

That afternoon the same agent called at 521 West Seventy-third Street. He was met by a butler, who treated the agent with cold disdain and refused to commit himself more than to assert that the house was the residence of Peter J. Manning, wholesale wood dealer. The servant thawed out, however, in an interview with a young woman who called later, asking for Miss Manning. Miss Manning, he ventured to say, was out; but was expected back at two o'clock. He had not heard that she had lost any chinchilla furs, but hoped the young lady would return, and if the furs found belonged to Miss Manning, he was sure that the finder would be well rewarded. Yes, he had seen Miss Manning with chinchillas, and it was his opinion that she had them on when she left the house at ten o'clock that morning. He hoped the young lady would call again.

At one o'clock a coupé drew up at the corner of West Seventy-third Street and Broadway and stopped. The curtains were drawn at the side of the carriage, but a man's face occasionally looked out from the little window in the end. Two o'clock passed, and three.

Meanwhile, another coupé had been standing at the corner of West End Avenue, at the other end of the same block. In this also the curtains were drawn; but at times a passing pedestrian caught sight of a young woman's pretty face, with light hair and blue eyes. At about half past two o'clock a woman wearing chinchilla furs passed the carriage. Its occupant immediately alighted and after a word to the driver, followed her. She walked rapidly along Seventy-third Street, and ran up the steps of number 521. The follower did not stop, however, but went to Broadway, spoke to the driver of the waiting cab, and sprang in. It immediately drove off.

At the studio Valeska went immediately to the telephone and rang up Jenson.

"The person you inquired about," she said, "is Miss Margaret Manning, and she is now at 521 West Seventy-third Street. I gave the Master the card-case you left, and with that as a test he went into an astral trance yesterday. While in that state he saw, clairvoyantly, the scene you described, as well as the girl's subsequent movements."

She waited for the reply and then smiled as she answered, "I'm afraid I can not tell you more of her, Mr. Jenson. The Master does not feel that he is at liberty to disclose the secrets revealed to him while in this astral state. Should events prove it advisable, however, he will inform you, as far as is possible. The girl is in trouble; but we must make sure that she desires your assistance before we let you into the details of her life. Yes, please send a check to Astro. One hundred dollars. Thank you."

"Oh, the girl is in trouble, is she, sorceress?" Astro asked languidly, looking up from where he was toying with his pet white lizard.

"Why, of course! What woman isn't?" said Valeska. "Did you ever encounter one who didn't have a secret sorrow, big or little?"

"My dear," and Astro playfully chucked her under the chin, "you are positively learning. You are right, of course. The first thing a charlatan has to learn is that every man likes to be understood, and every woman to be misunderstood. Both like to be considered sensitive, critical, good judges of human nature, and of delicate perceptions. No one objects to being called reckless; but every one dislikes being considered stupid. But, seriously, of course the chances are ten to one that Miss Manning has some pet sorrow, and if she hasn't Jenson will never know. At any rate, we have done our part. We'll see him again, though. Any man who has that affinity idea may be depended upon to do something foolish."

It was two weeks after that, however, before Jenson was heard from. He came in late one afternoon, pink-cheeked and immaculate, in stylish clothes, a clean-shaven, fresh, young man, evidently wealthy. Astro received him gravely. The Seer had on his oriental costume and his most effete manner.

"See here!" the young man began. "You're a wonder, I've got to confess that! I take off my hat to you, Astro. I don't know how you do it, but you certainly deliver the goods. I don't mind telling you that I came to this place as the result of a bet. I saw that girl in the subway and told one of my friends about it. He said, 'You go to Astro; he can do anything.' Of course, I didn't believe it, and all this nonsense about astral trances is rot. All the same, you *did* find the girl. It was Miss Manning, all right."

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Jenson," Astro's voice was a bit sarcastic, "I presume you did not come here to insult me. I take your exuberance as mere youth. As you know nothing of my methods, it would be courtesy, since they are successful, to accept what explanation I am pleased to offer. But I pass that by."

"I say, you know, I didn't mean to offend you." Jenson was visibly embarrassed.

Without reply, Astro rose and touched a gong. Valeska entered immediately. With a gesture toward the young man, the Seer left the studio.

"I say, I'm sorry!" Jenson began.

"The Master has his moods," said Valeska.

"I wanted to ask his advice."

"You may deal with me; and if he decides to continue with your case I shall let you know." Valeska looked her sweetest, but her voice was crisp and cool.

"Well, the fact is, I've seen Miss Manning three times, and she certainly has got me going. I wanted to talk to Astro about it."

"Talk to me."

"Well, it was this way. I went up to Seventy-third Street and hung around the afternoon you telephoned, and I did succeed in seeing her; but I was across the street, and before I could get to her she had got into a carriage. Well, I've been up there very often since; but I never caught her till about ten days ago. She was walking down the block, and as I passed her she recognized me and stopped. The first thing she said was, 'Can you help me? Will you help me?' I said of course I would. It was romantic. I don't mind saying it was mighty exciting to me. We walked a way, and she told me an extraordinary thing. I can't believe it; indeed, it's impossible. But she believed it, though she said it was impossible, too."

"Well, what was it?"

"Why, she said, 'I'm frightened because something that's obviously impossible is true. One hour ago I was in Chicago!' What do you think of that?"

"I should say that she was insane."

"That was my first idea; but, as you see, she herself admitted that such a thing was impossible, as it takes twenty-four hours to go from Chicago to New York. It was four o'clock. She said she was in Chicago in front of the Auditorium at three."

"Well, what did she expect you to do for her?"

"Why, that wasn't all; she said she had no idea where she was or what she was doing in New York. She didn't even know who the people were she was living with. She remembered having signaled to me on the train. She was lost then, too. She suddenly found herself with a stranger, a man who seemed to think he was her protector; but she was afraid of him. She had just heard him give his telephone number to a friend who had passed through the car. That was all the clue she had to where she was going. So she signaled that to me; but didn't have time to give me the name of the exchange, 'Columbus.' She wanted me to take her to Chicago immediately. I told her that was impossible; but that I'd go the next day with her and take her home. She was afraid of this man's following her. I made an appointment for the next morning. She was to meet me in the Waldorf-Astoria palm-room at ten o'clock."

"And she didn't come, of course?"

"No. I got frightened—thought that something serious was the matter—and called at her house. Sent up my name. She came down and coolly asked to know what I wanted. She pretended not to know me, and I was in a deuce of a situation. I floundered out of it as best I could; told her I had an appointment. She denied it; said she didn't know me, nor what I was talking about. And there you are!" Jenson crossed his legs and gazed at Valeska with big eyes.

"Well, I suppose you wish the Master to explain this?"

"That's what I came here for. I told him the first time I came it was on account of a wager. I bet my friend fifty dollars that Astro couldn't find the girl.

Well, I lost. This time I come believing in him. Will you see what you can do? I confess I'm fond of that girl. I've felt it from the beginning, the very first glance. I want to help her. I want to know her, and, you may think it absurd, but I want to marry her." He folded his arms and became almost defiant.

Valeska rose. "Very well. I can promise nothing; but I shall put it before the Master, and, as I said, I shall let you know his decision. Of myself I can do nothing; but I shall try to influence him."

Jenson left, thanking her profusely. Just as he opened the door, he said embarrassedly, "See here; I'd do anything for that girl!"

"Would you really?" Valeska asked, smiling.

"I mean just that,—anything!" And Jenson went out the door with a grim look on his face.

Valeska came back into the studio laughing. "Do tell me what it means!" she exclaimed after she had told the story to Astro.

He yawned. "Isn't Miss Manning calling quite often at number 85 Central Park, South?" he remarked casually, examining his long nails.

"Why, how do you know? I didn't know you had done anything more on the case."

"Oh, very little. It's scarcely necessary."

"But whom is she going to see?"

"Doctor George Herreschoff."

"A specialist?"

"A neurologist."

"I don't understand."

Astro smiled and shook his head indulgently.

"Well, I'll give you a book by Doctor Morton Prince to read. You'll find it as exciting as a novel; I might venture to say as exciting as Mr. Jenson's experience with Miss Manning."

Valeska knew more than to ask further. The Seer usually gave her a hint and let her exert her imagination.

"Don't forget the accident in the subway station at Fourteenth Street. And there's an article in the November number of *The Journal of Abnormal Psychology,"* he added.

He rose, went to the book-shelves that lined three walls of the vast studio, took down the book and the little magazine, and gave them to her with a smile. Then he walked into his laboratory to prepare, for her edification, the arbor Jovis, the arbor Dianæ, and the arbor Saturnæ: the trees of tin, silver, and lead.

He stuck his head out of the door a half-hour later and called over to where Valeska was reading under a lamp, "Your friend Jenson will never marry that girl he's after!"

"Oh, won't he?"

"No; she's going to disappear."

Valeska stared at him in wonder. Her look changed to amazement when he added:

"But he may marry Margaret Manning."

"Why, she *is* Margaret Manning," she replied, still puzzled.

"No, she isn't," he said, laughing, and shut the door of the laboratory.

The next day Jenson telephoned to the studio. Valeska came back from her conversation with him, leaving the receiver off the hook. "He says he has met Miss Manning again, and she still is urging him to take her to Chicago. But he has begun to be suspicious of her, and doubts if he ought to do it. He wants your advice."

Astro smiled. "You might tell him what I told you yesterday."

"Ah! but what's the use if he hasn't read *The Dissociation of a Personality?*"

"Then suppose you advise him to call on Doctor Herreschoff and ask his advice."

"Shall I, really? Who is he?"

"The most famous specialist on nervous diseases in America, who knows more of multiple or dissociated personality than any one living."

"Oh, I see. I'll tell him." And Valeska returned to the telephone to repeat the address.

"You understand now?" Astro asked.

"Of course. Miss Manning has a dual personality. In her normal state she does not, of course, recall Mr. Jenson. In her secondary state she appealed to him for help."

"Because she literally did not know where she was," added Astro. "Doubtless, from his story, while she was in Chicago her own normal self, she changed into the secondary character, in which she did not even know her own brother. She alternated between the two states, which may be called the A and the B. It is often the case that a mental or physical shock entirely changes the personality. That's what I thought of on reading of the accident at the subway station. No doubt she witnessed the accident. The shock broke up her personality, changed A, her normal state, into B. She had, no doubt, been B before, in Chicago.

But, finding herself with a man she did not recognize, she became alarmed. Her impulse was to appeal to the first likely-looking stranger for help. Somehow she was attracted to Jenson, and so she signaled to him."

"Then she was B again when she asked him to take her to Chicago?"

"Certainly. Of course she must have gone to Chicago between the time he saw her on the train and when he met her in the street. She recalled having been in Chicago at three o'clock. She must have changed almost immediately, and taken the train soon afterward. Then, upon arriving in New York, something threw her back into the B state again. Owing to her amnesia, while in the secondary state, she forgot all that had happened, and thought it was the same day that she was in Chicago. But when he called at the house, she had changed back to her normal condition. All that is evident from his story. It is as evident that such a case would be brought to Doctor Herreschoff for treatment, and doubtless he will be very glad to meet Jenson, who knows something of what has happened to her in this abnormal, or B, state. The doctor will undoubtedly treat her hypnotically and restore her to a permanently normal personality."

"And that's how Mr. Jenson's friend, poor B, will disappear?"

"Yes. There is, properly, no such person. B is merely a *part* of Miss Manning,—Miss Manning with certain faculties, including memory, missing. It's not so interesting a case as that of Miss Beauchamp, which Doctor Prince has written of, nor of the celebrated Felida X, reported by Azan. Of course there are all sorts of dissociations. Some persons break up into three or four separate and intermittent personalities. But Miss Manning is certainly interesting. I'd like to meet her, myself."

"And I'd like to know how poor Jenson's love-affair will turn out," said Valeska. "I'm sorry for him."

"I've no doubt he'll not only lose the girl he has fallen in love with, but he'll be asked to help in putting her out of existence."

"That's simply horrible! He said he'd do anything for her. I wonder if he'd do that? But it's all so mysterious and so impossible! Why, one might as well believe in witchcraft or magic it seems to me."

"It is just exactly what *was* called witchcraft in the old days. Now we understand it, and it is merely psychology."

Astro rose and pointed to the laboratory. "Do you remember the tree of Paracelsus?" he asked.

Valeska nodded.

"It is like that. In the Middle Ages that experiment was nothing but pure magic. No common person could understand that the clear solution and the mass of crystals were different forms of the same thing,—sulphate of sodium and water. In the same way, no one understood that one person could appear at different times under different forms; it was enchantment. To-day we understand that one's personality is merely the sum of his qualities, emotions and functions. This solid person may break up into other combinations; part of his functions may become synthesized and have a volition of this new group's own character. We see it every day. When we lose our temper we become temporarily dissociated. We say things foreign to our true nature. When we dream, too, we become different in many ways. Occasionally some natures in a state of unstable equilibrium topple over and change their mental and spiritual structure. Then we have such patients as Miss Beauchamp, as Miss Smith, reported by Flournoy, as Mrs. Smead, whom Hyslop describes, or Ansel Bourne, studied by Doctor Hodgson and Professor James. And how many unknown such are confined in insane asylums, who might be easily restored to normality, God knows!"

He had been walking up and down the great studio as he talked. Now he returned to Valeska, and for an instant his hand rested on her blond head.

"There's one thing more potent than mental shock that changes men's personality often enough," he said softly.

She looked up quickly, uncomprehending. "What do you mean?"

"Did I say one thing? There are two things that change a man's character essentially," he went on, looking at her thoughtfully. "One is a profound sorrow; the other is love." He walked away to the window. "Dickens understood that," he threw over his shoulder.

Valeska turned her eyes away from him, then rose and passed into the waiting-room.

Three days after that, Jenson called. He was no longer the blithe and joyous young man of fashion. Instead, he seemed prematurely old. His eyes were softer, his manner less careless.

"It all came true as Astro predicted," he said to Valeska, talking it over; "even to my never marrying the girl I fell in love with. Doctor Herreschoff told me all about her case, and asked my assistance in bringing her back to her true self. In her normal state she does not know me at all; in fact, there is almost a dislike of me, on account of my having been mixed up with her secondary self,—the girl who asked my help. But the doctor thinks my companionship is beneficial, and I have consented to give my assistance. If she appears in her abnormal state, I shall take her to him and have her treated hypnotically. Her changes come less often, and he thinks she will soon be permanently normal."

"You do love her, indeed!" Valeska breathed in admiration.

"Enough to murder her, in a way of speaking, for her own good!" he replied grimly. "But didn't I tell you I would do anything for that girl? Anything! Could anything harder be asked of me than that I should help myself to lose her forever?" He smiled wanly as he spoke.

"Oh, it won't be lost, that sacrifice!" Valeska exclaimed. "She will realize what you have done, in time, and she will—she *must* love you for it! Then it will be she herself, not a mere part of her personality, but the whole woman, who will repay you with her love."

"Perhaps." Jenson rose to go, and stood a moment, sadly thoughtful. "But somehow—confound it, that other girl, you know!—she *was* the one, after all—Well, I've given my word. All I want is her well-being. I'm satisfied. Good-by!" and he wrung Valeska's hand till the tears came into her eyes, though she made no sound.

She came back into the great studio and found Astro gazing abstractedly out of the window. He was so lost in his reverie that he did not notice her approach till she had laid a hand on his shoulder. Then he looked round, startled. His face changed wonderfully and became infinitely tender.

"You were right," she said softly, "there are two things that change human character, love and sorrow. Our poor Mr. Jenson has tasted both, I think."

"It will make a man of him," said Astro. "I hope it may make a man of me!"

He walked into the little laboratory. Into a Florence flask, filled with a solution of lead acetate, he dropped a few pieces of zinc. In an hour there had grown up, exquisitely feathery and foliated, the crystalline tree of lead, the arbor Saturnæ of the alchemists, potent with its parable of life.

Valeska found it there after he had left, looked at it a moment, and bit her lip in silence. Then, after a quick timid look about, she took up the flask and gave it a kiss.

VAN ASTEN'S VISITOR

"UNLESS it stops snowing pretty soon, I think I'll not go to Boston to-night, after all," said young Van Asten, of the law firm of Hipp & Van Asten. He stood looking out a thirteenth-story window, late one December afternoon, watching the big storm which had increased steadily in violence since one o'clock. His hat was tilted on the back of his head and his overcoat collar was turned up about his ears. Keen, quick, and clear-cut, his features showed handsomely in profile. He was the popular member of the firm among his affluent clientele.

"Looks like a blizzard," said the clerk, rummaging in a pasteboard letter-holder.

"Sure. The midnight train is sure either to be stalled or delayed, and I can go on Saturday just as well. I don't care to sit up for hours in a snow-bank." Then he turned suddenly to the clerk. "Say, has anybody from Selvig's been in to-day?" he asked.

"You mean about the Drellmont will case?"

"Yes. By the way young Drellmont spoke yesterday, I rather expect he's getting ready to compromise. He's a fool if he doesn't; and a bigger fool to expect me to show him the will, too!"

"Nobody's been in," said the clerk laconically.

Van Asten went out and plowed his way through rising drifts to the subway station. By six o'clock he was at the Gavel Club, and by eight had finished his dinner. Several games of pool, a long talk with a visiting Englishman, perusal of the French comic papers, and convivial gossip with late comers from the theaters full of tales of the storm, kept him warm and cheerful till midnight. Then, as the clock struck, he put on his things and went out.

There were few abroad at this hour, and not a carriage or an automobile in sight. The street-car lines had given up trying to keep the tracks clear, and he came across one darkened car abandoned in the snow. He had to fight his way home, struggling through drifts waist high. It was deathly quiet except for the sound of the wind.

He reached his apartment-house at last, and, stamping and shaking himself, climbed four flights of stairs, the elevator being out of order. At his door he stopped, surprised. Under the door there was a thin streak of light.

Van Asten's firm was still too young to enable him to live in the style he had been used to before going into business. His apartment consisted of only four rooms,—a large, L-shaped studio, a bedroom, and, off the entrance hall, on one side a bath-room, and on the other a kitchenet. A woman came in every morning to clean up the place; except for that, he was alone.

He distinctly remembered that no light had been left burning when he had left the place at ten o'clock that morning. What, then, could the light mean? No one save the janitor had a key to the place. His thought went naturally to burglars. He hesitated for some moments, wondering what to do. It was late to summon the janitor for assistance, and he would appear foolish if nothing serious had happened. He determined to investigate alone, and, prepared for an immediate struggle, he put his key quietly into the door and turned the latch. The door opened without noise, and he could see through the one opposite into the long studio.

There, a woman in mink furs stood, with her back to him, beside the great table. She was bending over, as if taking something from a bag.

The tension of suspense that had knotted Van Asten's muscles and nerves gave way to a little laugh. The romance of the encounter amused him keenly, though his curiosity was doubly alert. He took a step forward.

At the sound of his footsteps, the woman looked round quickly, and for a minute stood staring at him with an expression of alarm. Her hand went to her heart. She was a beautiful woman of twenty-three, dressed with elegance. She was a vivid blonde, with masses of heavy yellow hair, blue eyes and slender hands. For a single moment she stood there, immobile; then, to Van Asten's amazement, she ran forward and threw her arms about his neck and pressed her lips to his cheek.

"Oh, Paul! I'm *so* glad you've come! I didn't know what to do! I was afraid I'd have to stay here all night alone! Where in the world have you been?"

Van Asten calmly disentangled himself from her embrace and took another look at her face. She was blushing violently. "Will you kindly tell me, first of all, who you are?"

"Why, Paul! What in the world do you mean?"

"I mean I haven't the pleasure of your acquaintance, and naturally I have a little curiosity about a visitor at this hour."

For a second or two she gazed at him steadily, her lips parted. "Are you drunk, Paul?" she demanded finally.

"I'm not drunk. I simply don't know you. Why should I?"

"You don't know your own sister!" she exclaimed in a vibrant intense tone. Then she took a backward step, as if she feared him.

"My sister is in Boston." He stared at her with a frown and folded his arms. "What's your little game, anyway?"

"You don't know your own sister!" she repeated helplessly. Then she staggered back and sunk into a chair, hiding her face in her hands, and began to weep.

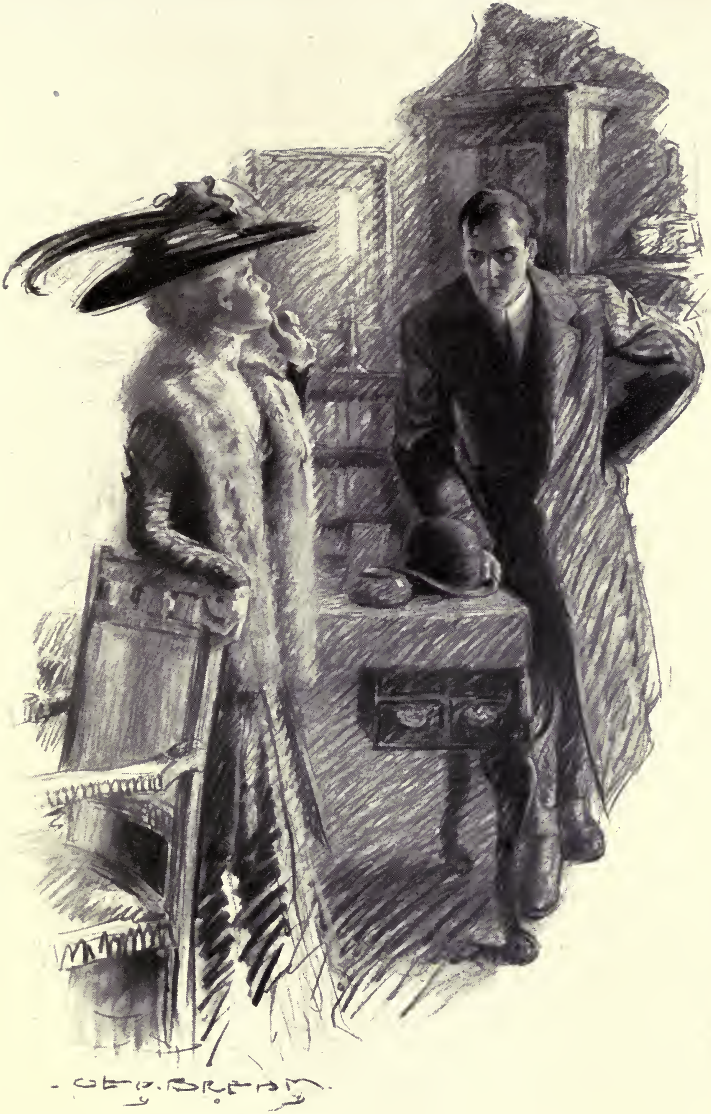
"You are not my sister, and you know it as well as I do! What do you want here, anyway?" he demanded, still standing, staring at her.

"Why, I want to stay here, of course! I've just come from Boston to visit you!" She suddenly sprang up. "The idea! It's a stupid practical joke you're playing on me, of course. Come, Paul, drop it, please! I'm tired, and want to go to bed. Where are you going to put me?"

"I'm going to put you outdoors!" he retorted.

"In this awful blizzard?" she demanded. She smiled sadly through her tears. The effect was really dazzling; but Van Asten kept his head.

He stopped and reflected for a few moments. Then,



"You don't know your own sister?" she exclaimed.

without taking his eyes from her, he took off his hat and overcoat, tossed them aside, and sat down. He tried hard to appear calm.

"Now," he continued, "I insist that you drop this masquerade and tell me immediately who you are and how you came here. You're either crazy, or it's some sort of blackmailing game. If you know anything about my sister, you know you don't in the least resemble her; and if you know anything about me, you know I haven't any money. So, out with it, quick!"

"I've told you!" she said, and loosed another pathetic smile at him.

He frowned impatiently. "Then you *are* crazy!"

"No, I'm afraid *you* are!"

The deadlock continued for some minutes before either spoke again. Then he began more quietly. "I don't know what's the matter with you. It's too much for me. But, of course, I can't let you stay here. Neither can I put you out into this storm. The only thing I can think of is to telephone to some one to come here. But no woman could get here to-night, even if she should be willing to. I confess I don't know what to do with you."

"It's perfectly all right," she answered sweetly. "I'm your sister, and surely you should be willing to let me have your room for to-night. You can sleep on that big couch round the corner of the studio, and you'll be sober in the morning. When you wake up, you'll probably recognize me. I won't be hard on you, my dear. Only, really, you ought to be careful what you drink." She rose, walked over to him, and patted his head.

He jumped up abruptly and walked away, opened his bedroom door, and stood there for a moment. "Come in here!" he commanded.

"All right, Paul!" she answered with extravagant humility, and, casting down her eyes, walked into the room. Just before she closed the door she came near him again.

"Aren't you going to kiss me good night, Paul, dear?" she asked.

Without answering her he pulled the door to, and heard her swiftly lock it on the inside. Then, still frowning, he walked up and down the long studio for ten minutes. Once or twice he stopped outside the door to listen, but heard nothing. Later she called out "Good night, Paul!" to him in blithe accents. He bit his lip and resumed his promenade, more worried than ever. The thing was uncanny. He no longer accepted the situation as romantic; he felt decidedly uncomfortable and embarrassed. Some one was making a fool of him, or worse.

Suddenly a thought came to him, and he went to the telephone and spoke as low as possible, "Madison, 5555!"

For fully three minutes he waited without receiving a reply.

"Madison 5555 doesn't answer," came the word at last.

"Ring 'em up again!" He spoke a bit more loudly. In two minutes more he heard, "Hello!"

"Is this Astro?"

"Yes. What the deuce—"

"Wait a minute and I'll explain."

"Well, hurry up! You've got me up out of bed."

"I'm Paul Van Asten, and am at my apartment at the Elton, 444 West Twenty-first Street. I've just come home and found a strange woman in my place. She says she's my sister. Pretty and all that, well dressed, and not otherwise obviously mad. But she worries me. I can't put her out; and she won't go, anyway. What'll I do? Could you possibly come over here? It's mighty embarrassing."

There was a pause, then this inquiry, "Did you find her before she saw you?"

"Yes, opened the door and there she was."

"What was she doing?"

"Standing up, looking into a bag, or something."

"Dressed for the street?"

"Yes, it looked as if she had just come in."

"Did you say how long she had been there?"

"I think she did say she'd waited some time."

"Where is she now?"

"Locked in my bedroom."

"Good. I'll come right over. I can't get a cab in this blizzard; so it may take half or three quarters of an hour."

"All right. But for heaven's sake, hurry! I don't know what she'll do next!"

"Oh, wait. Describe her, please!"

"A blonde, with yellow hair, and lots of it. Rather small, with blue eyes. Mink stole and muff."

"All right. Good-by. I'll hurry."

Van Asten hung up the receiver with a sigh of relief. He had heard much of Astro the Seer and his marvelous solution of mysteries, but the young lawyer did not place much faith in these sensational tales. Astro was, however, a close student of human nature, and, if not intuitive, at least shrewd, and his knowledge of society, and his willingness to undertake any case, however delicate, made him a desirable companion in so embarrassing a crisis.

Van Asten threw himself into a chair commanding a view of the bedroom door and took up a book. No sound came from his chamber. From all that could be gathered, his erratic visitor had gone to bed and to sleep. Now that he was sure of a tactful and clever companion, he rather looked forward to seeing the girl again. He could at last permit his imagination to play with the situation. It might be, after all, a romance—who could tell? The girl was pretty and cultured. No great scandal could ensue with two men there; and somehow, with his luck or his astuteness, Astro would bring the affair to a pleasant solution. A half-hour went by. Van Asten yawned, read a little, and again fell into a reverie. It was three-quarters of an hour before the electric bell sounded. Van Asten ran to the door, threw it open, and Astro, covered with snow, picturesque in slouch hat and Inverness cape, entered.

"Well," he said amusedly, stamping his feet, "when did she leave?"

"She didn't!" said Van Asten. "She's in that room now."

"Oh, didn't she?" Astro shrugged his shoulders and walked toward the bedroom door. "Well, let's see her."

"But, heavens! you mustn't open that door! She's probably in bed and asleep! And besides, the door's locked."

"So it is," said Astro, trying the handle. "I shall have to ask you for a button-hook."

"I haven't any except one in that room."

Astro reflected a moment. Then he asked, "Have you any canned goods in your larder?"

"I have some canned chicken, I believe. Why?"

"And a gas-stove, I presume?"

"Yes." Van Asten looked puzzled, but led the way to the kitchenet. He took down a tin of chicken and handed it to the Seer.

Astro removed the key fastened to the top for the purpose of opening the tin, then went to the stove and lighted a burner. He heated the split wire till it was red-hot; then, taking a pair of small pliers from his pocket, bent the end into a right angle. Returning to the chamber door, he inserted this rough skeleton key into the lock.

"I'll take the responsibility of awakening or disturbing your visitor," he said, smiling at Van Asten. "You must give me full authority to do what I please."

As he spoke he was trying the lock. After some unsuccessful attempts, the bolt shot back. He turned the handle and threw open the door. "Light up!" he commanded sharply.

Van Asten, more embarrassed than ever, stepped to the switch on the wall, and the room was immediately illuminated. Then, staring about him, and finally at Astro, he stammered, "By Jove! She has gone, hasn't she?"

"Of course. You didn't really expect her to spend the night, did you?"

"Well, that's what she said she was going to do. I'm glad she didn't, I confess. Unless—" then he stopped suddenly. "By Jove!" he ejaculated. "Could she have been a burglar?" His eyes roved round the room in trace of corroboration of his surmise, and fell upon a partly raised window which gave on an inner court, or air-shaft.

"Could she have escaped that way?" He ran to the window and threw up the sash.

As he did so, Astro stooped to the floor and picked up a hairpin, glanced at it, and put it into his pocket. It was of silver, fully six inches long, evidently specially made for a woman with an immense mass of hair. He said nothing of his discovery, however, but followed Van Asten to the window.

"She could hardly have got out that way," said the young lawyer.

"It's unlikely," Astro assented; "but I see you have an electric reading lamp. I wonder if it will reach to the window?"

He took it from the table, and, finding that the wire was long enough; held it above his head outside the window and looked down to the bottom of the court.

"I don't see her," Van Asten laughed.

If Astro saw anything, he did not mention it. He drew himself in, replaced the lamp, and pulled down the sash.

"I didn't expect to see her hanging by the hair of her head, like Absalom," he remarked. "But," he added casually, "what kind of hair did she have?"

"Yellow hair, pounds and pounds of it, apparently, though you never can tell nowadays, when all the women are wearing rats."

"Where is your telephone?" the Seer inquired.

Van Asten led the way back into the studio. Around the corner, out of sight of the chamber door, the receiver stood on his library table.

"She got out while you were talking to me," said

Astro. "That's plain enough. Now, the question is, what's missing?"

"By Jove! That's true! But I didn't notice any disturbance. Hold on!" he stood for a moment with his eyes fixed. "The Drellmont will! Good lord! if she came for *that*—" Instead of finishing, he ran back to the chamber. Astro followed him quickly enough to find him at a writing-desk there, rummaging through the pigeonholes.

He stopped and exclaimed, "Thank the Lord!" and held up a package of papers. "Here it is, safe enough. It wasn't that she wanted, at any rate."

"What about the Drellmont will?" Astro inquired casually.

"Why, I took it home yesterday to study on the case with it. You've heard of Albert Drellmont, of course?"

"The millionaire? Yes."

"Then you know he had a scapegrace son, who went to the bad a year or so ago. Well, this is the will disinheriting him. Old Drellmont had made another only a few months before, leaving his son the bulk of his property. Young Drellmont has been trying to bluff his way into the fortune, by claiming his legacy under the old will and asserting this to be a forgery. This, you see, is in favor of his half-sister." He handed the document to Astro, who took it and examined it carefully.

"Drellmont's attorneys are a sharp lot; but Drellmont himself hasn't a cent, and I don't see how he can afford to fight the case, considering what little show he has against his sister. In fact, I've been expecting an offer to compromise. He came in this morning and wanted to see our will. Of course I shouldn't have showed it to him if I had had it; but I told him it was here. If it had been stolen, we should have been up against it, though we should have won in the end."

"What was the date of the former will?"

"January 1, 1908."

"And this, I see, is just six months later, July 1, 1908."

"Yes, it was made after Drellmont, junior, had that affair with a chorus girl. The papers were full of it. After that, he went West and got into more scrapes. I understand the police are after him now. My client, Miss Drellmont, has wanted to compromise, just to get rid of him, but I wouldn't have it."

"I see." Astro spoke abstractedly as he handed back the document. He was sitting near the secretary, and, as he listened, had picked up a red blotter that lay on the desk. As he rose, he kept it in his hand, and when Van Asten put the will away Astro put the blotter into his pocket.

There was a strange light in his eyes, however, as he gazed at the young lawyer. It was as if he were analyzing him, deliberately, scientifically, reading his character in his features, one by one, weighing his soul in the balance.

"Well, I think I can't do anything more now," he said, finally. "I'll try to get home before the drifts have got any higher. If you miss anything else, telephone me. You might inquire of the janitor, too. He may know how your visitor got in."

"What do you think she wanted, anyway?" said Van Asten.

"Ah! I can't tell you that—yet. But there are evil vibrations here. I feel wrong. She wanted no good, you may be sure of that. I shall try the crystals and go into a psychic trance."

Van Asten smiled. It did not escape Astro's notice.

"Having engaged my services," he said calmly, "I shall expect you to follow my instructions to the letter. I can help you; and I think you need more aid than you imagine."

Van Asten immediately became serious. "I believe you do know something," he said. "Well, I don't care how you find out. I know I can trust you. Let me know what to do, and I'll do it."

As Astro opened the outer door of the Elton, the drifts were two feet high. The snow drove in gusts of fine icy particles, and it was bitterly cold. The flakes came in squalls, driving clouds before them; one could scarcely stand upright against the blast. He bent his head forward and fought his way. Before he had gone a block his hands and ears were almost frozen. Another block, and he sought refuge in a doorway to beat himself, rub his ears, and stamp a little warmth into his feet.

There was a drift filling a corner of the doorway, and, as his eyes fell on it, he saw a black patch beneath. Brushing the snow aside, he came upon a woman, unconscious with the cold. She was dressed in black, and wore mink furs. Her heavy yellow hair was fastened with long silver pins.

Bending over her, he tried to restore her to consciousness; but it was impossible. Her hands and feet were indubitably frozen, and she had succumbed to the exposure. The covering of snow had, in a way, protected her; but the case was desperate. What was there to do? Outside in the street there were no signs of life. Had the doorway been that of a residence, he might have rung the bell and appealed to the mercy of the residents. But it was the entrance to a small office building, and no one would be in at this hour. Astro was ten blocks from his studio. He had reasons for wanting to be alone with the girl. A little scrap of mink fur he had found caught in the outer doorway of the Elton fitted suspiciously with a torn place at the end of this woman's astrakhan stole, and her hairpins matched the one in his pocket.

A gray splotch came into view down the avenue. It was a two-horse carriage, laboring painfully into the teeth of the blizzard. As it approached, Astro ran out and bribed or bullied the driver into taking him and the woman to Thirty-fourth Street. It took half an hour, and more than once the man on the box stopped and protested that he would have to give it up. But they finally arrived at number 234, and, taking the inanimate form in his arms, Astro carried her up-stairs.

His first action, after depositing her on a sofa, was to ring for a doctor. His next was to telephone to Valeska, and urge her to attempt to come immediately to the studio. Then he returned to his charge.

She still gripped a leather bag in her frozen hands. Astro separated the stiffened fingers and put the bag away. Next, he got brandy and forced it down her throat. Wrapping her in warm blankets, he chafed her hands with snow till the doctor arrived. Leaving the two alone for a few minutes, he opened the bag quickly. It contained several bills, a bunch of keys, a handkerchief, and a penciled note. This he opened.

The note-paper was imprinted with the name of the Swastika Hotel. It read as follows:

> "The job must be done to-night, or it will be too late. S. will give up to-morrow. Do it if you can, let me know immediately here. P. D."

Valeska, living only two blocks away, succeeded in arriving at the studio by four o'clock in the morning. By the time she came in Astro and the doctor had restored their patient to consciousness and the use of her limbs. The woman was, however, weak and suffering. Rest was enjoined, and the doctor left definite instructions that she was to remain in bed all day.

"What I want you to do, Valeska," said Astro, "is, when this lady awakens, to talk with her long enough to study her voice. By nine o'clock you must be able to give an imitation of it that will pass over a telephone wire without being detected."

He proceeded, then, to narrate the whole story of the night, from the time he was awakened by Van Asten's message. Valeska listened attentively.

"You say that when you looked down the air-shaft you saw a broken bottle at the bottom?"

"Yes, almost hidden by the snow. And here's another clue." He took the blotter from his pocket and passed it to her. "Do you see anything significant in that?" he asked.

"There's a spot where the ink that was on it has disappeared," she said. "But I don't quite see what that means. You say the date of his will was all right, wasn't it? I thought first that she might have gone down there to alter the date, and so make the old will valid."

"But, in that case, the marks of the erasure, even if done with Labarraque's solution or any of the ready-made ink destroyers, would have proved that it had been tampered with."

"That's so. Well, I'll think it over. But do you know who this girl is, yet?"

"She's a friend of Paul Drellmont's, and no doubt his tool." Astro passed over the note he had found in the bag.

"I see. I'm to report to him, then, over the telephone, in her voice, that the thing has been done?"

"By no means. You're to tell him that you failed."

Valeska bent her brows over the riddle. "Well, I hope I won't have to go into details."

"No, he'll be satisfied. You see, this is his last card. If she failed, he'll not care to fight the will case any longer. He knows he's beaten, and he can't pay his lawyers. He'll offer to compromise, and I shall tell Van Asten to make a reasonable offer."

"The girl failed, then, in whatever she went for?"

"No, she succeeded."

"Then won't Drellmont find out about it, and make more trouble?"

"I hope he'll leave immediately. If he accepts a sum of money to compromise, I think he'll quit New York without delay."

"Oh! And you expect to keep this girl hidden away from him till then?"

"Exactly. This blizzard was a godsend for Van Asten and Miss Drellmont."

"Well, I don't understand yet what she went to his rooms for, but I'll do my part."

It was just nine o'clock, and the unknown girl was again sleeping quietly, when Valeska rang up the Swatiska Hotel and inquired for Drellmont. After a moment there was a reply.

"It's me, Paul," she said. "I'm awfully sorry; but I couldn't get down there and do the business." Valeska dropped the receiver with a shocked expression.

"What did he say?" Astro asked.

"I refuse to tell you." Valeska put up the instrument and rose.

"Didn't he even ask where you were?"

"No, indeed."

"Then it's as I suspected. Drellmont has been playing on this girl; making love to her, probably, in order to use her as his tool. Now she's failed, he has no further use for her. Well, I think it serves her right. Perhaps it will teach her a lesson. Now, I'll give my instructions to Van Asten."

He rang up the lawyer. After the conversation he returned to Valeska and said:

"He's agreed to compromise, if Drellmont calls. The janitor told him this lady presented a typewritten note, with his name forged to it, inviting her to wait in his apartment for him. That's how she got in there. I suggested that he hint at prosecuting Drellmont for blackmail, on the strength of that episode, and he has agreed to suggest to the rascal that he leave town immediately as one of the conditions of the compromise. But it's a ticklish game, altogether. I don't know whether I ought to explain everything to Van Asten or not."

"Why, I should think he ought to know," said Valeska.

"Why, then, you haven't solved the mystery of the lady's errand?" he asked.

"I confess I haven't."

"Well, then, I'll tell you. It's so ingenious and simple that you'd probably never get it alone. The fact is, that she went down there to erase the date on the will. This she did, and then wrote in the *same date,*—July 1, 1908. I saw it immediately I cast my eyes on the document. When I saw the broken bottle at the foot of the air-shaft, I suspected that she had thrown away some damaging evidence. When I noticed that spot on the blotter where the ink had been bleached, I was sure of it. The only question, then, was whether Van Asten himself hadn't taken the paper home to tamper with it. But, as the date was right, of course, he couldn't have."

"What was her, or rather Drellmont's, reason for putting in the same date, then?"

"Why, so that when the will was probated they could call attention to the erasure and subsequent rewriting. That would cast suspicion on the whole document and no doubt the first will would be accepted as legal."

"Oh, it *was* simple, wasn't it? But you didn't tell Van Asten?"

"No, not yet. I want him to offer the will for probate as it is. You see, it is undoubtedly genuine; but if it had been tampered with, he'd never be willing to handle it. I got that from my study of his character.

I'm going to take the responsibility on myself. If Drellmont leaves town before he can communicate with this lady, whoever she is, he'll never know that she succeeded, and Van Asten and Miss Drellmont will be safe. When this blond lady finds that she has been abandoned, she won't care to play into his hands, especially as it may get her into trouble herself."

Late that afternoon, as Valeska was busy in the laboratory off the studio, she saw the girl pass swiftly toward the waiting-room. Valeska waited and listened.

"Give me Madison Square 2615 . . . Hello! Is Mr. Drellmont there? . . . He's left? Why that's impossible! . . . This afternoon? Where did he go? . . . No address? . . . Are you *sure?*" The receiver went on the hook with a snap.

Valeska waited to see what she would do next. A few minutes later she stole to the portières and looked into the waiting-room. No one was there!

"Well," said Astro, "you should have followed her. That girl was clever. Any one who could act as well as she did with Van Asten would be a valuable assistant. I might have used her."

Valeska's fine lips curled. "I think one assistant is enough for you, sir! She was altogether too blond. I always distrust that kind!"

The Seer smiled. "Well, as for that, I prefer blondes, myself."

He took a step toward her, but she evaded him, and sought refuge in the office. Not, however, before she had paused in the doorway to shake her finger and ask, mischievously: "Are you *perfectly* sure?"

THE MIDDLEBURY MURDER

RETURNING, late one night, from an investigation which had carried them down to the Battery, Astro the Seer and Valeska were suddenly nearly thrown from their seats by a sudden stop of the green limousine.

They were driving along Canal Street, and, as the vicinity was apparently deserted, the Seer of secrets looked in surprise from the window to see what was the matter.

A police officer was speaking in tones of command to the chauffeur. Astro, recognizing him as Lieutenant McGraw, smiled in relief. The police officer came to the window with his hat in his hand.

"I beg your pardon, sir, but I recognized your car, so I just ordered your man to stop. I wanted to speak to you a moment. Ah, Miss Wynne, it's glad I am to see you!"

Valeska gave him her hand and a smile.

"I've just been called from the office," said McGraw, "on a case that may be interesting, as I know how you like mysteries. Perhaps you might help me out, even." And Officer McGraw winked elaborately. "When it comes to giving a crook the third degree, or raiding a joint, I'm there with the goods; but this looks like a murder, and murders are sometimes—"

"I see," said Astro suavely. "Well, if you can get in here, we'll go with you. Where is it?"

"Just around the corner, here, at the Aspenwall building on Grand Street." And, after Astro had given the order to the driver, McGraw went on. "You see, the night watchman has just telephoned for an officer, as something suspicious has happened. He seemed excited, and it may turn out something doing, or it may not."

"Well, I'll be glad to be first on the ground, at any rate," said Astro. "That ought to make it easier to solve, if it should happen to be a mystery."

He had scarcely finished when the car drew up at the entrance to the Aspenwall building. A full-bearded man in jumper and overalls was waiting scowling in the doorway. He came immediately forward.

"There's a murder or a suicide been committed here, I'm afraid," he began; "but I didn't want to do anything till I had the police, to be on the safe side. It's up on the tenth story, in Mr. Middlebury's office."

"Has any one left the building since you telephoned?"

"No, I made sure of that. The elevator boy thought he heard a shot fired, and I went around to all the lighted offices. They were all right except at Middlebury's office, where there was no answer when I knocked. The door was locked."

"How many tenants are in the building now?"

"There have only been two or three here to-night, and some went before this thing happened. There's only one I know of,—Mr. Moffett, on the ninth. I think he's there yet. I spoke to him a little while ago."

"Better ring for a couple more men, McGraw," said Astro.

After the party had entered the corridor, McGraw rang up the office, then returned to the elevator. The boy had just come out, and was standing with white scared face in the corridor. He was a thin anemic youth of eighteen, with red hair and roving, pale blue eyes with dilated pupils.

"Now, young fellow," said McGraw, "what do you know about this?"

"Nothing, sir. Only, I thought I heard a shot fired, and I called Thompson."

"You didn't go up yourself?"

"No, only to take Thompson. I waited in the car while he knocked on the door."

"Where did you find Thompson?"

"On the fifth floor. I went down to the boiler-room at first, thinking he was there; then I tried each floor till I found him."

"What time did you hear the report?"

"About half past eleven o'clock."

"How many people have you taken up on the elevator this evening?"

"Only one or two. Mr. Moffett went up to his office on the ninth at eight o'clock or so—he must be there now—Mr. Smythe, on the fourth; but he left at ten o'clock, about. I don't remember the others."

Astro now turned to the night watchman, Thompson, a heavy-set hairy man, who stood with his mouth open, listening as if fascinated.

"What have you been doing this evening, Thompson?"

"Why, I had a bite of lunch in the boiler-room at about eight o'clock. Then at nine I made my rounds to see if everything was all right. I have to look for signs of fires or burglars or anything wrong, you know."

"How many offices were lighted up?"

"Smythe's and Moffett's and Mr. Middlebury's; that's all I remember, sir."

"Where were you when this boy called you?"

"On the stairs, going up to the sixth floor."

"This is the only elevator running at night?"

"Yes, sir. I'm supposed to keep run of this boy and see that he stays till midnight."

At this moment two officers appeared at the entrance. Astro turned to McGraw. "Tell them to keep hidden outside," he said, "and nab any one leaving the building. Now we'll go up and see what has happened."

As the five entered the car, Astro, whose look had fallen on the rubber matting on the floor, moved over nearer the elevator boy, and, pushing him a little aside, picked up a slip of paper on which he had been standing. It proved to be blank; but the Seer, after scrutinizing it, put it away in his pocketbook. The boy slammed the door and the car started up the shaft. Astro touched the boy's arm.

"Stop at the ninth floor!" he commanded.

The elevator boy looked up in surprise; but pulled the lever and threw open the hall door.

"You wait here," said Astro to Thompson and the lad. "Come on, McGraw. We'll see Moffett first."

They walked down the hall and around a corner till they came to a lighted door. Astro, without knocking, threw the door wide open. It was a small room, and at a roll-top desk a man jumped up quickly in consternation. In one hand he held a revolver, in the other a cleaning instrument. A box of cartridges was open beside him. He stared at his unexpected visitors.

"Good evening, Mr. Moffett," said Astro. "What are you doing with that pistol?"

"Why—I'm—cleaning it," said Moffett. The pistol dropped from his hand as he spoke, and he turned white at the scrutiny of his interlocutor.

The Seer gazed for a moment without speaking at the small, smooth-shaven, anxious-looking man who confronted him. He wore iron spectacles and was shabbily dressed. His thin bony hands trembled visibly.

"Did you fire that pistol this evening?"

"Why, no—of course not!"

"What were you cleaning it for?"

"Why—I always carry it when I go home. I live out at Kingsbridge, and there have been so many hold-ups—"

"Did you hear a shot fired in this building to-night?"

"Good God, no!" Moffett's alarm increased. He put his hand to his head. "You don't mean—there's anything happened?" he faltered.

Instead of answering, Astro walked over, picked up the revolver from the floor, and examined it. The chambers were empty. Next, he looked at the box of cartridges. Five were missing. Of these, four were scattered on the desk.

"When did you fire this gun last?" he demanded.

"Last night—at a cat," said Moffett.

McGraw laughed aloud.

Astro went to the window, threw up the sash, and looked out. The roof of the adjoining building was only two stories below. He gave it a glance, then lowered the window and walked to the door.

"Will I bring him along, sir?" said McGraw.

"No, leave him alone. Mr. Moffett, remain here till we come for you, please." And with that, Astro went out. In the hall he turned to McGraw.

"You don't mind my taking charge of this?" he asked.

"You bet I don't!" McGraw exclaimed. "But I don't see why you want Moffett to make a get-away."

"He can't get past the men down-stairs, can he?"

"That's right. But did you see any empty cartridge shells on the roof below?"

"No. We'll have to examine the roof later. Now we'll go up to Middlebury's office. We've lost too much time already."

"Have you a key to Middlebury's office, Thompson?" he asked on reentering the elevator.

"No, sir. Mr. Middlebury lost one of his office keys this week, and was given the duplicate the superintendent had till another one could be made for him."

"What did he need two for?"

"One was for his stenographer, I believe."

"Oh, he had a typewriter, then?" said Astro.

The elevator boy interrupted. "He had one, but she left to-day."

"How do you know that?" Astro turned to the youth with a keen gaze.

The elevator boy cowered under his inspection. "Why—she told me so, that's all."

The elevator had reached the tenth floor and stopped. The boy threw open the door and the party stepped out.

Almost opposite the elevator, across a narrow hall, appeared a lighted door, on which was painted the legend: "John Middlebury, Architect and Landscape Gardener." Above it was a transom tilted half open.

"Give me a leg up," said Astro, and, placing his foot in Thompson's big hand, he raised himself to the height of the lintel and looked in. He stayed there for a few minutes, then dropped to the floor again.

"Well, it's a murder, fast enough," he said to McGraw.

"We'll have to bust down the door, then," said the officer.

"Unless the boy can crawl through the transom."

"No, I can't!" exclaimed the boy. "It's too narrow."

"You try it," said Astro.

"I don't dare to!" the lad whimpered.

McGraw laid a heavy hand on his shoulder. "Now, then, my son, go to it, and no talk!"

With that, he lifted the lad bodily to a handhold on the lintel. "Hurry up, now, Dennis!" said Thompson gruffly, and the boy struggled through the opening, pulled his legs inside, and dropped to the floor. In a moment he opened the door and stood as white as paper, trembling in horror.

Beyond a counter that shut off the front part of the office, below a large drafting table in the center of the room, the body of a man lay on its back, the arms outstretched on the floor. The eyes were shut, and one hand still held a small black rubber drawing triangle. The counter shut off a view of his feet. He was a man of some thirty years, with black mustache and sparse beard, a handsome picturesque type of slightly foreign appearance.

Astro passed through the little door in the counter with McGraw, and together they bent over the body.

"There's no blood at all!" said the officer in amazement. "What is it, anyway? He can't be shot!"

Astro made no reply for some moments, but examined every detail of the body with care. At last he rose. "Thompson," he said, "have you a gun?"

"Why, no sir!" Thompson spoke anxiously. "At least, I ain't got any with me. I got one down in the boiler-room, though. I don't carry it all the time, sir."

"Go down and get it!" Astro spoke sharply. "Bring it to me! No, Dennis, you stay right here. Thompson, take the elevator down yourself. Tell the officers to telephone for a doctor."

The watchman left without a word, shaking his head. The elevator boy sat down on a chair outside the counter and gazed dismally into the corridor.

Astro stood for several minutes silently looking about the room. His eyes went from the drawing-board, where the perspective view of a country residence had been roughly sketched in pencil, past the ground-glass windows which admitted light from a side hall opposite the elevator, to the doors of an inner room. Valeska's eyes followed his in careful search of the room.

McGraw still stared in amazement at the body, looking for some sign of a bullet wound, but without success. At last he arose, and gazed long at Astro.

"He's dead, all right," he said finally; "but hanged if I can see what killed him! Could it be suicide? Perhaps we can find some poison, somewhere. Look in the dressing-room."

"He's shot," said Astro, without looking at the corpse. "Valeska, see what you can find in the private office in there." He pointed to the inner door.

As she started to go in through the door in the counter, her foot struck a strip of cardboard that shot in along the floor. Astro glanced at it, then stooped and picked up an advertising calendar. He walked to the waiting space outside and began to examine the wall carefully. The elevator boy's eyes followed him listlessly. The Seer stopped near the hall door and fixed his eyes on a small hole in the woodwork. Then he went back to the drawing-board and examined it attentively. There was a large black blot on it where evidently a bottle of India ink had been spilled. The paper was fastened down with thumb-tacks in the form of wire spirals. He drew one out and put it into his pocket.

Suddenly Valeska called out, "There has been a woman in here to-night!"

Astro and McGraw hurried into the private office. Valeska was standing by a small set bowl in the corner and held up a tiny gold ring.

"Do you see?" she exclaimed. "The bowl is full of soap-suds and dirty water. She must have left in a hurry without stopping for her ring."

"Ah, it was a woman shot him," said McGraw.

Astro examined it, took a long look about the room, tried the private door that led to the branch hall, and then went back to the architect's office. "What was Mr. Middlebury's stenographer's name?" he asked of the elevator boy.

"Miss Wilson." Dennis looked up with a look of alarm.

"What time did you take her up in the elevator?"

"I didn't take her up at all, to-night!" was the response; but his eye wandered away from his examiner.

"I took her down, though, when she left here, at five o'clock."

"It's queer she should leave her ring here, then, and dirty water in the bowl."

"Perhaps it was another woman," the boy ventured.

"Perhaps it was. Did you carry up any other?"

"Why, I think I did; but I can't quite remember. I think she went out again, though."

"You have a remarkably poor memory," said Astro acidly.

The door was now flung open again, and Thompson appeared. He showed signs of the greatest distress, his eyes staring, and his mouth lax.

"The gun has gone!" he exclaimed, and stood gazing helplessly at McGraw.

"It has! Then I'll have to arrest you," said the officer, and he took a pair of handcuffs from his pocket. "Hold out your hands, my man!"

Astro apparently paid no attention to this scene, and walked again into the office and stood looking at the body. "You'd better get Moffett and take them both down-stairs. I'll look about a bit. When the doctor comes, send him up. Send some one to look at the roof under Moffett's window to see if he can find an empty cartridge. Keep a watch out yourself for any one going down-stairs."

When McGraw had gone with his prisoner, Valeska approached the Seer and gazed timidly at the body of Middlebury.

"Look at his left eye," said Astro soberly.

Valeska shudderingly did so. "There's the tiniest drop of blood there!" she exclaimed. "It's a strange case and would puzzle any one who hadn't brains. I wonder what poor old McGraw would have done alone?"

Astro smiled grimly.

"Do you know who did it?" Valeska asked breathlessly.

"Of course."

"What, already? It seems impossible. There are three persons to suspect, aren't there?"

"Who are they?"

"Why, Moffett and the watchman and the mysterious woman who was undoubtedly here to-night."

"That woman is still in the building. I saw her hiding by a corner of the stairway as we came up; but I didn't mention it, as I knew the men below would get her if she attempted to escape."

"Which one did it, then?"

"That's what I shall have to prove before I leave the building. I'm sure enough; but I need evidence. Just at present what worries me is, how did that calendar happen to fall down from the wall where it was fastened with one of these spiral thumb-tacks?' He pointed to those on the drawing-board.

At this moment they heard the bell of the elevator, which now was standing at the floor below while Mcgraw made his second arrest, begin to ring furiously. Astro ran out into the hall and listened. In a moment McGraw entered the car with his two men and the car descended. The dial in the front of the shaft showed its descent to the fifth floor; then the marker stopped.

Astro pointed to it. "They've captured the girl," he said. "We'll wait for Miss Wilson in the office; I'm not through with my investigation yet."

He walked rapidly back, passed the body, and reentered the private office. Sitting down at the desk in the corner, he began a rapid investigation of the pigeonholes. Suddenly he held up an envelope on which was printed, "James Moffett, Aspenwall Bldg., New York City." Opening this, he took out a letter and read it aloud:

> "My Dear Middlebury: I can't wait any longer for that money. You'll positively have to pay it by the fifteenth or there'll be trouble for you sure. I'd like an immediate answer. J. Moffett."

"Looks bad for Moffett, doesn't it?" said the Seer, putting the note into his pocket. "But look at this! Here's something worse."

He had just opened a small drawer and looked in. As he spoke he held up a revolver. "One cartridge used. I'm sorry for Miss Wilson."

"And the night watchman's pistol yet to be accounted for!" said Valeska.

"Oh, I think I can account for that, all right," said Astro. "I'll locate that as soon as I get the time. Here comes the latest suspect. See what you make of her. You know women."

The elevator door opened with a snap, and McGraw, holding a young woman by the wrist, entered the outer office. She was a pretty blonde, her eyes now red with weeping. She wore a neat blue tailor-made suit and stylish hat. The elevator boy came in behind her and gazed at her hungrily.

"We found her on the fifth floor trying to get down," said McGraw. "She has acknowledged that she was up in Middlebury's office this evening."

Astro turned swiftly to the elevator boy. "What did you say you hadn't taken her up for?" he demanded.

"Oh, God! I knew she was up there; but I didn't take her up; she walked up-stairs. I hoped she'd get away and nobody'd know. I thought she'd gone already."

"And you wanted to shield her? Why?"

Dennis hung his head. Then he muttered shamefully, "Because I'm in love with her, sir, that's why! And I didn't want her to get into trouble. She didn't do it, sir. I'll swear she didn't shoot him!" He looked down at the body in horror, then turned his eyes away and began to sob hysterically.

"Well, then, Miss Wilson, what have you to say for yourself?"

She had taken one look at the corpse also, and had turned away, her tears breaking forth afresh. Between her gasps she told her story:

"Mr. Middlebury was too attentive to me, I thought, and then yesterday he kissed me. He said he wanted to marry me; but I didn't believe it. So I told him I was going to leave. I did leave to-day, and never expected to come back here. Mr. Middlebury had paid me, and everything, only I found I had forgotten my house keys. So I had dinner down-town and then came back here, because I knew Mr. Middlebury would be working late alone in the office on a rush job he had. I didn't want Dennis to know I went up, because I had told him about Mr. Middlebury's kissing me; so I waited till he went up in the elevator, and then I ran up-stairs, trying to keep out of his sight. Only, he caught me half-way up. Besides, I had to hide from the night watchman, because he had had a quarrel with Mr. Middlebury, and he thought I had complained of him."

"Oh, Thompson had quarreled with Middlebury, had he?" said McGraw meaningly.

"Yes, sir. Middlebury had Thompson discharged. He has to leave at the end of the week, and he was pretty angry about it. But I didn't have anything to do with that at all. It was on account of Thompson's refusing to let Mr. Middlebury have an extra key to the door."

"Where is Thompson?" Astro asked.

"Oh, he's safe enough with my men down on the first floor."

"Well, go ahead with your story, Miss Wilson."

"Why, Mr. Middlebury was awfully nice and apologized for kissing me, and proposed to me again. I didn't know what to say to him; but I was afraid he didn't mean it and was up to some game with me. He tried to hold my hand, and I snatched it away so quick I upset a bottle of India ink he was using. So I went into his private office to wash my hands. While I was in there—" She covered her face with her hands.

"You took a revolver from the desk drawer?" said Astro.

She looked at him in amazement, with widely opened eyes. "A revolver? No! Of course not! I washed my hands at the bowl, and just as I was finishing I heard a pistol-shot, and then I heard Mr. Middlebury fall."

"Did you look into this office?"

"Oh, no; I was so frightened I didn't dare to. I waited a minute till I heard the door slam: then I opened the door to the side hall and ran down-stairs."

"You saw nobody?"

"Not a soul."

"Was the elevator there?"

"Oh, I didn't look! I only wanted to get away as fast as I could. I was afraid that I was going to be suspected and arrested. You see, I knew there was a pistol in the private office, for Mr. Middlebury had shown it to me one day. I thought that if he threatened me I might use it to protect myself with."

"Yes, and that's exactly what you did do, I'm thinking," said McGraw gruffly.

Valeska took Miss Wilson's hand affectionately and pressed it. "Don't be afraid, my dear," she said.

With this friendly help the girl became more calm.

Astro, calm and picturesque, the cape of his Inverness thrown negligently across his shoulder, scrutinized the girl keenly for a few moments. His eyes passed over every detail of her costume, analyzed every feature. He was standing so, mysterious, potent, inscrutable, when his face changed suddenly.

"Do you remember, Miss Wilson, whether there was a small calendar pinned to the wall by the door there when you came in?"

She looked up, her eyes still streaming. "Why, yes, I'm sure there was. That is, I stuck it to the wall with a thumb-tack yesterday, and I don't remember its having been taken down." She looked at him in surprise at his question.

The door opened again, and the doctor, who had obtained a key to another of the elevators, coming up alone, entered the room and gave a curious look around.

"I'm Doctor Flynn," he announced. "What's the trouble?"

"There's your man," said Astro, pointing gravely to the body of Middlebury. "He's been dead an hour or so. You'll find he was shot through the eye. The bullet pierced the brain, and the man bled only internally. Lift his left eyelid and you'll see."

"That's more than I could find out," cried McGraw. "So he was shot, then, for sure. Now, then, who done it?"

"We'll leave the doctor here to make his examination," said the Seer. "We'll take Miss Wilson downstairs. I'm about through, now. I promise you the criminal will confess before you can get the coroner and the patrol wagon here."

Leaving the doctor to his examination of the body, Astro and Valeska walked into the elevator, followed by McGraw, who still held Miss Wilson in his heavy grip. The elevator boy stepped in, shut the door, and the car descended. In the hall of the ground floor an officer was standing with Moffett, and another with Thompson, each of the prisoners being handcuffed. As Astro came up, another policeman hurried in from the front entrance.

"I've found the cartridge," he said, holding up the small copper cylinder. "It was not twenty feet away from Moffett's window, on the roof of the next building."

"Yes, I threw it out of the window. It was just before I cleaned the gun. I told you I shot a cat last night with it."

McGraw laughed in derision.

Astro looked Moffett over quietly and said. "I believe, Mr. Moffett, that Mr. Middlebury owed you some money, did he not?"

"Yes—why?" Then Moffett's face changed to terror.

"And you threatened that he would have trouble if he didn't pay up, did you not?"

"By George! we got the man all right now!" said McGraw.

"I got my pay, though, only yesterday," exclaimed Moffett. "You'll probably find the receipt in Middlebury's pocket, or with his papers."

"Which shows how dangerous it is to judge a man on circumstantial evidence," remarked Astro.

"Well, it's more than we got against the others," McGraw grumbled.

"My dear old chap, I'll show you circumstantial evidence enough to convince you, before I'm through. Besides that, I'll let you listen to an outright confession. Now you had better let Mr. Moffett depart in peace. He's had a narrow escape. It's lucky some one with psychic perceptions was here to rescue him from the web of circumstance."

"It was the night watchman then, I'll bet on that!" said McGraw.

"Well, we'll take up his case next. Let's see, he owed Middlebury a grudge for having him discharged. He had a pistol; but he can't produce it. What has he done with it?"

They had approached Thompson by this time. The night watchman was listening, trembling in his turn. His face had the color of clay.

"I kept it down-cellar in my table drawer, near the foot of the elevator shaft. I have no idea what has become of it!" he pleaded.

Astro touched the officer who had been holding Moffett. "Take the elevator and go down to the cellar. Open the door of the nearest furnace and look in and see if you can find a gun."

"Is it there?" said McGraw. "How in blazes did you know that, you wizard?"

"Where would you hide a gun better?" said Astro, smiling. "If it isn't there, you'll find it in some corner, or in one of the ash barrels. It doesn't matter much, anyway."

Valeska, meanwhile, was trying to comfort Miss Wilson, who was crying and talking intermittently. The two blondes made a pretty picture together. McGraw, who since his first visit to the Seer's studio, had always admired Valeska, looked on, apparently touched. Finally he could endure his curiosity no longer.

"For God's sake, sir, it ain't the girl, is it?" he asked in a whisper.

Astro laughed, and waited. The elevator boy sat on a bench, a picture of dejection, waiting for the outcome. It was ten minutes before the officer reappeared from the basement. As he threw open the elevator door he showed, hanging from a bent wire, the distorted metal work of a revolver, still glowing a dull red.

"It was just where you said, sir," he explained.

Astro gave a glance at it, then turned to Thompson. "What have you to say?" he asked.

"I don't know how it got there," said Thompson dully.

"I believe this is your last week as watchman here?"

"Yes, sir."

"And it was Mr. Middlebury who caused your discharge?"

"Yes, sir." Thompson stared stupidly at his large feet.

"Then you had good reason to hate him? He is shot, and your revolver thrown into the furnace. It looks bad, my man!"

"I swear to God I'm innocent!" Thompson looked wildly into the impassive face of the Seer.

And, as he did so, Astro's face softened. "I believe you. I think you can take the handcuffs off him, McGraw."

"Take 'em off! Why, he must be the one who done it! Any fool could see that!"

"You're fool enough to, no doubt," said Astro, shrugging his shoulders; "but if you want the credit of detecting the murderer, you'd better free this man and listen to me."

Astro had proved his marvelous powers of deduction or intuition too many times, and too much to McGraw's own advantage, for the officer to refuse.

"It's sure too much for me!" he muttered to himself as he unlocked the handcuffs.

"Well, now we'll have an interview with the real criminal," said Astro, walking over to the two girls.

Miss Wilson, hearing this, looked terrified at him; but there was no expression there that could reassure her. She opened her lips to speak, but could not.

Astro began deliberately, speaking so that his words echoed through the corridor. "Miss Wilson, by your own confession you were in the office of Mr. Middlebury at the time he was shot."

"In the inner office, I was," she ejaculated.

"In the inner office, where there was found a revolver with one cartridge used," added Astro.

The girl nodded, her face pale.

"You have confessed to Dennis, here, that Mr. Middlebury had kissed you and that you were offended. You have confessed that he made a proposal of marriage to-night that you suspected was false and only a game to fool you with."

"Oh, but I'm sure now he was sincere!" Miss Wilson cried. "I am sure he loved me! I'm sorry I suspected him of anything ungentlemanly!"

"Nevertheless, there was a scuffle. He attempted to take your hand. You escaped to the inner room—where the revolver was kept."

"Only to wash my hands!" she wailed.

"Your story is too flimsy," said Astro, his voice suddenly grown harsh, as he turned to McGraw. "Officers, I charge Miss Wilson with the crime of murder! Arrest her and handcuff her!"

Valeska, who had sprung up in surprise and indignation, opened her lips to protest. McGraw, instead of moving forward, had taken a step backward, when Dennis, the elevator boy, jumped up and seized Astro's arm.

"Don't arrest her, don't!" he shrieked. "I done it myself!"

"You done it?" McGraw echoed.

"Yes! Arrest me!" and the boy held out his wrists imploringly.

Astro coolly took out his cigarette case and lighted a cigarette. "Well, McGraw," he said, smiling, "didn't I promise you a confession?"

McGraw, stupefied, clasped the handcuffs on Dennis' wrists. Miss Wilson fell, almost fainting, on the bench, where Valeska put her arm tenderly about her.

"Well, Dennis, you're fairly caught," said Astro. "I've known for some time that you were guilty; but it's so much more satisfactory to have an out-and-out confession. Now I'll trouble you for the key to Middlebury's door." And, so saying, he reached into the boy's trousers pocket and brought forth a small Yale key.

"When did you find it, Dennis?"

"I found it last week, sir, on the floor of my car."

"And you kept it thinking it might come in handy, and perhaps get the night watchman into trouble, eh? So you were jealous of Mr. Middlebury on Miss Wilson's account, were you?"

"Oh, it made me wild, sir! I just couldn't stand it when she told me he had kissed her, and when I saw her going up there to-night I went crazy."

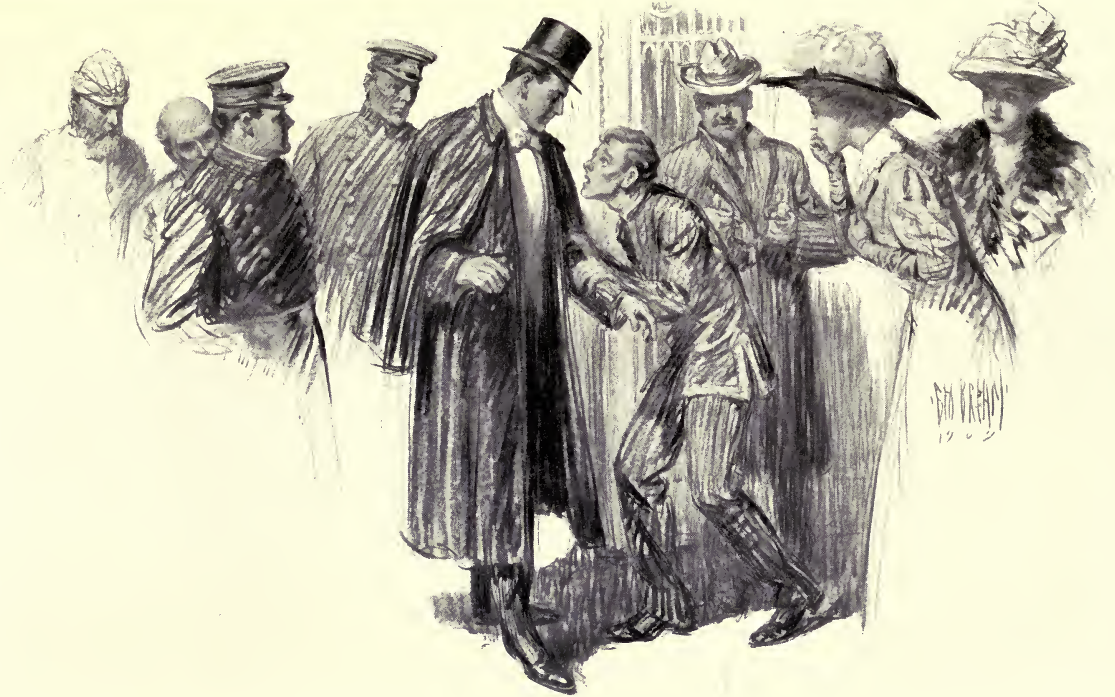
"So you stole Thompson's gun from the cellar, went up when Thompson was on his rounds, opened the door with your key, and shot Mr. Middlebury?"

"Yes, sir!" Dennis' voice was faint.

"Then you ran your car to the cellar, threw the gun into the furnace, then went up and found Thompson and told him you had heard a shot?"

"Yes, sir. Oh, I was crazy! I was crazy about her!"

"And you thought if you said nothing about her she would escape?"



“Don’t arrest her! Please don’t!”

"Yes, sir. For God's sake take me away! I don't ever want to see her again!"

"Patrol wagon's come, sir," said one of the officers, walking up to McGraw. He laid his hand on Dennis' arm.

"One minute, please," said Astro. "Dennis, my boy, will you please hold up your left foot? Thank you!" And as the boy did so Astro removed a spiral wire thumb-tack that was imbedded in the rubber heel of the boot.

"What's that for?" McGraw inquired.

"The law doesn't permit a defendant to plead guilty to a charge of murder. You may need this for evidence when the case is tried." As the elevator boy was led away he looked at him pityingly. "Cocaine," he remarked to McGraw.

"Sure. Dope done it, all right. He was worked up to it. It may do for an insanity defense."

"He's a mattoid. You'll find his parents or grandparents were criminals, poor devil!" The Seer turned to Miss Wilson. "You've had a lucky escape, too, my dear. It's fortunate that I was here."

"Oh, I don't know how to say how grateful I am!" she exclaimed.

"We'll drive you home," Valeska volunteered. "I know this shock has been terrible for you. Do come with us!"

She drew the girl toward the doorway and they bade good night to McGraw. As Astro and the officer waited talking for a moment, the girls entered the green limousine. But, hardly in, Valeska returned to the doorway hurriedly. McGraw had gone inside.

"I can't wait till we've left Miss Wilson," she said.

"Do please let me see that paper you picked up in the elevator. I think I see where you got your first clue, now. Dennis, the elevator boy, had stepped on it, hadn't he?"

Astro took the paper from his pocketbook and handed it to his assistant. Faintly indented on its surface was a small spiral.

"Yes, I'll have to confess, Valeska," he said, "that, if it hadn't been for that small scrap of paper, McGraw would have had three prisoners instead of one in custody to-night!"

VENGEANCE OF THE PI RHO NU

"GRACIOUS! It's perfectly wonderful! Why, you've told me things *no* one has *ever* known about me." The young woman gazed at Astro with her deep brown eyes—eyes that bespoke feeling rather than intellect.

Then she drew a long breath, as if seeking courage to speak. "There's one thing I'd like to know if you can tell me," she added anxiously, "shall I be married soon?"

Astro leaned back into the shadow and contemplated his client. She was young, vivid, temperamental, and decidedly pretty. But he looked in vain for evidences of a sense of humor. Her level eyebrows were too delicately straight for that. Her lips curved deliciously, but not with whimsicality. There was no doubt about it, Miss Pauline Wister was a bromide; and he must act accordingly.

"Very soon," he answered.

She drew a sigh of relief, and he felt her clasp on his hands relax. "I've been worrying a little," she confessed.

It was evident that she was willing to talk, and Astro waited a moment without answering, bending in closer scrutiny over her palm. He finally put down her hand, nodding his head mysteriously. "I can see that you are in trouble. If I can be of any help, I shall be glad to do what I can."

Miss Wister released her hand and opened her bag, from which she drew a small envelope. Her lips trembled as she looked at the Seer.

"I am to be married to-morrow morning at ten o'clock," she said; "that is, if nothing happens to prevent it." Her fingers clasped the letter more tightly. "I am engaged to Mr. Edward Farralon; but—but I haven't heard from him since yesterday noon!" There were tears in her big brown eyes as she gazed up at him.

As Astro, however, only nodded gravely, she went on. "I tried to telephone to him last night, and he was not at home; at least, he didn't answer. I tried this forenoon, and they told me that he had not been down to his office. And—and I'm to be married to-morrow!" Miss Wister had almost broken into tears.

"You've been seeing him often and quite regularly, I suppose?"

"Oh, yes, every day! That's what makes it seem so strange. Do you think anything can have happened to him? I don't know what to do! I daren't tell any one for fear of making talk, and if he's all right, that would be dreadful. But there's something else—here, look at this letter I got this morning!"

Astro glanced at the envelope she passed him, saw that it was addressed with a typewriter, and took out the single sheet it contained. On this was typewritten the line:

"Beware the Vengeance of the Pi Rho Nu!"

"Well," he said, "that certainly is enough to give a girl the creeps on the day before her wedding. You have no idea what it means, I suppose?"

"No. I'm awfully alarmed; but at the same time —I'll have to tell you—Edward is an awful jollier, and is all the time playing jokes on me; so I never can be sure of anything. He says he's training my sense of humor." Miss Wister smiled sadly. "But the fact that he's missing is different. It frightens me!"

"My dear Miss Wister," Astro said, clasping her hand in assurance, "if you'll leave this to me, I'll promise you that you shall be married promptly on time. You need give yourself no anxiety about it. As it happens, I have nothing else to do, and I shall be glad to help you."

"Oh, I'm *so* relieved! I knew that if you would only try you could solve the mystery. You know, I used to know Mrs. Chester when she was Ruth Lorsson, and she told me the story of how you helped her. It was that made me want to tell you."

Astro smiled. "Yes, I confess love-affairs do rather amuse me, and I'm always willing to help straighten them out. So, if you're willing to do exactly as I say, I'll take this on."

"Oh, I'll do anything!"

"It may cost considerable money, too."

"But think of having trouble with my wedding! It's awful! Why, I don't know but I ought to countermand the invitations! Of course, I don't want to unless it's necessary; it's a terrible thing to do."

"Go right ahead, and trust to me. I'll promise to have Mr. Farralon on time. Is it at a church?"

"No, we're to be married at my house, 5678 Lexington Avenue."

"All right. Where is Mr. Farralon's office?"

"Eighteen West Thirty-second Street. He's the American agent for a Belgian rubber firm, you know, and has only a small place for a headquarters."

"He's a college man, I suppose?"

"Yes, Stapleton University, '04."

"Who is to be his best man?"

"Why, Mr. Stringer, a classmate of his. He's a lawyer; a patent lawyer, I think. I've told him about Edward's disappearance, and he's promised to find him to-day; but I thought—"

"You'd make sure?" Astro smiled as he rose. "Mr. Stringer knew nothing, I suppose? Did he offer to come and see you about it?"

"Yes; said he'd be up this afternoon."

"Very well. Let me know if he's found out anything. Meanwhile, be ready to do anything I request. I'll consult my crystal ball immediately. Valeska!" he called, raising his voice. "Show Miss Wister out, please."

His guest had no sooner left than Astro took up the telephone. He called for Edward Masson, a man whose friendship he had won at the time of the solution of the famous Denton boudoir murder mystery. Of the conversation that ensued, Valeska, returning to the palmist's studio, heard only one side.

"Is this Mr. Masson? . . . You're a Stapleton University man, aren't you, Masson? . . . Were there any local secret fraternities there along from 1901 to 1904? . . . What was the name of it? . . .

The Pi Rho Nu? . . . Can you get me a list of the members? . . . Rather lively crowd, eh? . . . Well, thank you, but you'll have to hurry. Telephone me here as soon as you can."

He hung up the receiver and turned to Valeska. "We have but little time, and there's much to be done. I can't explain till later. You'd better wait here till Masson telephones, and stay till I come. I'm off right away. Ring up Lieutenant McGraw, and ask him if he can get me a burglar's jimmy, and also ask him to investigate the Belgian Rubber Syndicate's office, 18 West Thirty-second Street. See if there's anything crooked about it. I'll be back as soon as I can. Oh! If Masson rings up soon, go out to Miss Wister's house, look it over outside, and hurry back and be ready to report the lay of the land."

Two minutes after that, Astro was in a green motor-car headed for West Thirty-second Street. Here he alighted and went in through a narrow doorway. There was a narrow hall with a single elevator, and a flight of stairs leading upward. A list of names on the wall showed that the office of "Edward Farralon, American Agent, Belgian Rubber Syndicate," occupied room twelve, on the third floor. Astro pressed the bell, and shortly afterward the elevator door rolled open. A red-headed man in shirt sleeves was inside.

"Mr. Farralon has an office here?" said the Seer.

"Yep; but he ain't in."

"Been in to-day?"

"Nope."

"Here yesterday?"

"Yep."

"Did you see him go out last night?"

"Nope. He worked rather late, though, I think. He prob'ly walked down-stairs. The elevator boy skipped last night; so the box wa'n't working. I'm the janitor; just running the car till they can get another boy."

"Ah! So the elevator boy skipped, did he? What was his name?"

"Mickey Flynn. He'll have hard work getting another job, if I can prevent it, leaving me in the lurch like that!"

"Do you know where he lives?"

"Out on East One Hundred and Fifty-sixth Street, I believe. Let's see, I believe I got it writ down in my pocketbook somewhere. Did you want him?"

"I dropped a package in the car yesterday, or in Mr. Farralon's office, I don't know which. If I can't get into Farralon's office, I want to see the boy, in case he found it."

"Well, you'll never get it, then, I'll bet! But I'll give a look and see if I can find the address. Let's see. He come here about two months back." He looked over the greasy pages of the note-book till he found the page. "Here it is: 1575 East One Hundred and Fifty-sixth. That's right. Well, I hope you'll find your package, sir."

Astro went back to the cab and drove immediately to the address. It was a tenement swarming with children, and he was directed to the fifth floor, where, at his knock, the door was opened by Mickey himself. It took only a short talk to convince the boy that he would avoid trouble if he told what he knew immediately, and he explained his disappearance from his post of duty with considerable anxiety.

"I was in de box up to eight o'clock, all right.

Along about then two swell chaps come into de hall and asked me was Mr. Farralon up-stairs. Yes, I says, he was. Then one o' de chaps peeled t'ree tens off'n a roll o' bills and shoved it into me fist. 'Beat it out'n dis here!' he says. 'Go chase a new job,' he says, 'an' lose yourself! Dis here is give you so you don't come back for a week,' he says. Well, I didn't ask no questions. It looked like a easy way to make t'irty to me, an' I got me coat an' piked out in a hurry, and went up to de Circle T'eater to see de show. An dat's all I know."

"How did they come?" Astro asked.

"In a buzz wagon. I copped dat off all right. Say, I'll give you de number for anoder ten."

"You'll give it to me without that, or I'll have you arrested! I'm a detective!" the Seer threatened.

Mickey's eyes grew big; he was evidently a hero worshiper. He fumbled in his pocket and drew out a bit of newspaper. On it was scrawled the number 11115.

"Dat's de mark, all right," he explained. "Say, I'm goin' to be a 'teck myself when I grow up. Will youse give me a job?"

Astro laughed. "If you'd had sense enough to wait and see what those two men did, I'd give you a job right now," he said.

Mickey groaned. "Gee!" he exclaimed. "W'y didn't I t'ink o' dat? I was dopin' out w'at I'd do wit' de money. I was crazy to see a show."

"Well, what did the men look like, then, if you're such a good detective?"

Mickey brightened visibly as he replied, "Say, I got dat, all right. Look a-here! One was a tall guy wit' specs and a little mustache and, gee! w'at a neck! De other was built like Jim Jeffries,—stocky an' heavy. Looked like he could punch, all right! Mout' full o' gold teeth, he had. De other chap called him Frank."

"Was there any one in the car when you left?"

"Dey was a ch'uffer dere, all bungled up so I couldn't reckernize him, wit' goggles and one o' dem hairy coats."

"All right. That's worth the ten you wanted, I think." And Astro passed over the bill and started down-stairs.

Mickey leaned over the rail and shouted, "Say, boss, de tall guy had a leather bag!"

Astro nodded and regained his car. "Drive to the nearest big automobile dealer," he ordered.

The car stopped before the Aeromobile warerooms. Astro got out and asked to see the automobile list. In two minutes he had found that the car registered number 11115 was owned by Frank Brigham of number 1212 Charles Street, in Greenwich village, New York. A look at the telephone book showed Brigham's business to be brokerage, and his office to be 1000 Wall Street. Astro reentered the cab and returned to the studio.

Valeska was not in the place. A boy in buttons informed him that she had left a half-hour ago, after having answered the telephone.

A package had come from Lieutenant McGraw. Astro opened it, and took out a burglar's jimmy and a note. It read:

> "Be careful; but if you get in bad, let me know.
> Belg. Rub. Synd. O. K., as far as I can find out.
> "McGraw."

It was a quarter of an hour before he heard Valeska enter.

"Did Masson give you any names?" was his first inquiry.

"Yes; Mr. Paul Stringer of Flatbush, Mr. Richard Hanbury of Albany, Mr. Frank Brigham."

"Of 1212 Charles Street?"

"Yes!" Valeska looked at him in wonder.

"And what about Miss Wister's house? You've been out there, I fancy?"

"Yes. It's a five-story brick dwelling. It's on the corner."

"What about the other houses in the block?"

"I have the names of the owners from the *Social Register,* all except one, which is vacant and for sale."

"Real estate agents?"

"Swan & Dowell, 3421 Broadway."

"Very good. Telephone right out there for an appointment; then hire that house and pay in advance for one month. Tell them you'll sign a lease if the place is satisfactory. Use any excuse you need. Just where is it?"

"At the other end of the block, on the corner of the next street."

"All right. Then, as soon as possible, look up Stringer—he's Farralon's best man—and see where he goes to-night. Find him, and don't lose sight of him! I'll have to work quickly, if I'm going to keep my word to Miss Wister."

"You think Stringer knows something of it?"

"He hasn't been to see Miss Wister, and that's suspicious. I telephoned to her and to his office. He hasn't been there. They say he's out of town. That means he doesn't want to be found; but you must try to find him. Miss Wister will give you a description. Now I'm off!"

He ran down-stairs and jumped into the waiting cab. In less than twenty minutes he was at Frank Brigham's Wall Street office. Inquiring of the office boy, he discovered that Brigham was in; but, instead of waiting, Astro took the elevator down to the street. There was an automobile waiting by the curb, and he looked at the number. It was 11115! He went back to his taxicab.

"Can you keep up with that car?" he asked, pointing to Brigham's machine and handing the chauffeur a five-dollar bill.

The man touched his cap and grinned. "I'll do it or get pinched for speeding!" he answered.

Astro got into the cab and waited, watching through a slit side of the curtain window. Within five minutes Brigham appeared with a tall thin man in eye-glasses, wearing a small, black, close-cropped mustache. They entered the tonneau of the automobile, and the car moved off, followed by the taxicab. Winding in and out of the up-town traffic, the car was easily followed until it stopped at the Hotel Saint Nemo, where the two men alighted. Astro followed them to the grill-room, waited till they had seated themselves, and took a table not too far away to watch them.

Cocktails for three were brought. Astro's eyes narrowed as he awaited the third conspirator. In a few minutes he appeared, and the Seer of secrets had time to make up his mind that he was the missing best man before his suspicion was corroborated by Valeska's unobtrusive appearance in the doorway. He gave her a sign that she could safely join him, and she came to his table as if she had been expected.

"How do you suppose I got him?" she asked jubilantly. "I called him up on the telephone, and some one asked my name. I replied, 'Pi Rho Nu.' It was a sudden inspiration, though I haven't the least idea what it means. As soon as he answered, I hung up, and got to his apartment-house as soon as I could. He took a hansom, and I had no trouble in following him. Who are these men?"

"Brigham and Doctor Hanbury," said Astro. "At least I imagine that the one they've been calling 'Doc' is Richard Hanbury. I wish they'd talk a little louder."

"Wait till they've finished those cocktails," said Valeska sapiently.

The three men were already laughing uproariously. One was telling a story, marking imaginary circles on his cheeks as he spoke. At the close of the narration all three lifted their glasses and drank a health.

"Was that 'To the ride'?"

"Not quite." Astro was seated nearer to the group.

At nine o'clock the men showed signs of being about to leave the dining-room, and Astro and Valeska had just time to make their exit first without being observed.

"I'll have to continue the chase alone," he said. "You'd better try and find out what you can from Farralon's apartment. See his man, if you can. You can act the French maid for that. Any valet will talk, if he thinks you come from some woman. As for me, I may be in the police court for burglary by to-morrow morning; and so, if I'm not at the studio by eight o'clock, you'd better see Lieutenant McGraw. Here they come, now! Good-by!"

In another minute his cab had again taken up the chase of car 11115. They sped north, crossed the park, turned into Seventy-second Street, and finally flew at full speed straight out the Broadway boulevard. Here the little taxicab had hard work following; but kept on and on, nearly to Kingsbridge. Here the open drawbridge enabled Astro to catch up. Beyond that, the car turned sharply to the right and went a hundred yards, stopping before a large brick building that stood alone. It bore the sign of a sewing-machine company but was apparently deserted, though a light shone from one of the upper floors.

Astro, whose driver had stopped the cab at a safe distance, got out and walked on cautiously. Luckily it was dark and cloudy. As he went up the steps to the door, he could still hear the voices of the men who had just entered. The door was ajar. Instantly he slipped inside, and, suspecting that the doorkeeper would return after he had shown his guests the way, he dodged into a vacant room off the hall.

Here he waited nearly an hour, and, hiding close to the door, heard several visitors arrive, saw them give the hailing sign and pass up-stairs. At about eleven o'clock the watchman looked at his watch, lighted his pipe, and walked into the room opposite, evidently to sleep. This was the time, if any time were safe, to investigate the upper floors.

Up one floor he crept softly, found all dark, and listened. From higher up came now the sounds of laughter, of singing, and an occasional cheer. He crept up the next flight; the noise grew louder. He opened a door at the right of the landing, and found a large hall, once used for machinery. The pounding of feet on the ceiling told him that the men he had seen enter were immediately above. He paced the room, and found it to be a hundred feet by fifty. Opposite the long row of shuttered windows was another door. This he entered, and found a small room, evidently once used for an office, with a fireplace, mantel, and one window.

Step by step he now ascended the next flight of stairs, the sounds of revelry growing louder every minute. A glance above showed a streak of light through the half-opened door. A nearer approach showed another door, corresponding to that of the office he had noticed below. He darted up to the landing, put his hand to the handle of this door, and it opened easily. Passing in, he closed it behind him and looked about.

There was a cot bed with a pair of blankets drawn up against the wall, a basket of food, and a pitcher of water and many beer bottles on a table. A fireplace on the other wall corresponded to the one he had seen below. Astro stole to the keyhole of the door leading into the hall and listened. A smile came to his lips.

"Brigham! Brigham!" the company was yelling.

From his post Astro could see only the broad back of Brigham in the light of many candles; but he could hear perfectly the speech that followed.

"Brothers of the Pi Rho Nu," Brigham began, "far be it from me to try to make a speech to-night—as you know I can't! But I'll take my turn in testifying to the utter depravity of the prisoner."

Cries of "Hear, hear!" interrupted him, and after they were stilled Brigham went on.

"The event is now a piece of the history of the Pi Rho Nu; but I'll briefly state the facts. Two years ago I was married."

"How delightful to be married!" the crowd began to sing.

"And it was my fond intention to pass my honeymoon in an automobile. In fact, it was begun all right, and I'd have been safe if I had contented myself with driving only daytimes. But on my very first evening—we were married at noon—I was held up by a band of desperadoes on the road from Albany to Troy. I should have been able to take care of all of them with my fists; but I could never look a gun in the muzzle calmly. The result was that I was tied up with Mrs. Brigham and carried into a lonely house. She was put into one room, and I into another. Gentlemen, I ask you to picture my feelings that night, as I heard scream after scream coming from the room adjacent for hours unending. It was only because I knew my bride had been carried safely away to the nearest hotel that I was able to sleep at all. So, gentlemen, I demand the penalty of—"

"Death!" shouted the rest in a chorus of laughter, after which there were calls for "Doc Hanbury." Hanbury was invisible from Astro's peep-hole, but his voice rose clearly.

"I also was married," he began, and was also interrupted by the popular chorus; "but under painful and embarrassing circumstances," he continued. "The afternoon of the wedding my flat was entered and I was garroted by two masked men. I was tied to a chair, and then one of them painted my face deliberately but too fancifully with iodine. He painted my cheeks in circles, gentlemen, and my brow was a picturesque plaid of squares. Those of you who were present at the ceremony possibly remarked the grease paint that attempted too unsuccessfully to cover my shame. I had to do it. You can't explain an absence from your own wedding except by—"

"Death!" came the jovial chorus.

One after another proceeded to testify, each constantly interrupted by the hilarious members of the fraternity.

Astro had heard enough. It was evident that Farralon, the master spirit of the association and fiercest of its practical jokers, had met his just deserts. Just what they would do with him, Astro could not guess; but that the bridegroom would need a friend was not to be doubted. How was he to be helped? Astro determined to complete his investigation of the building before he decided. Undoubtedly the gang would make a night of it in the house and keep Farralon a prisoner till the last moment, if indeed they did not prevent the ceremony. The Seer took an electric torch from his pocket and stole up-stairs.

The floor was planned like those below, with the same big hall, the small office, and fireplace. As it was in the office that Farralon was to be locked, evidently, when his fraternity members had departed, Astro looked over the little room carefully. The iron shutters were barred and immovable. There was only one safe means of communicating with the prisoner after he was left alone,—by way of the chimney. Astro took the jimmy from his pocket and set to work inside the fireplace, to open a hole on each side. Which of the two flues ran down into the next floor it was impossible to tell. He must be ready for both. It took two hours of hard work to get the bricks out; but by the time the company were racketing down-stairs Astro had the satisfaction of perceiving a faint light deep down in one of the openings. It was now only a question of waiting till Farralon was alone, and hailing him. To find out what was going on, he had started down-stairs when he heard voices. A man was still in the larger room speaking through the closed door of the office.

"Don't you try and make a row now, or we'll come in and make you quit! You keep quiet, Farralon! I'm going to turn in now. So long, old man! Dream of your bride and a happy wedding!" and after turning the key in the door he rolled over on a cot in the hall. In a few minutes he was snoring.

Astro stole up-stairs and put his mouth to the hole, calling Farralon. No answer came. Then he sat down on the floor, took off his sock, and raveled out a long line of silk. Next, he wrote a short note, fastened the paper into his pocket-knife, and tied the line to it. This he let cautiously down the hole, and jangled it softly at the bottom. In a few minutes he felt the line pulled taut. Farralon took the note, read it, and came back.

"Who's up there?" he called up in a loud whisper.

"A friend!" Astro replied.

And thereupon ensued a long dialogue; after which the Seer of Secrets, chuckling to himself mightily, stole down-stairs and out the door, found his still waiting taxicab, and was driven rapidly back to the city. It was four o'clock when he threw himself, exhausted, on the great couch in his studio.

At half past nine that forenoon, Astro and Valeska stood behind the inside shutters of the parlor window at number 5652 Lexington Avenue. It was the house that Valeska had rented at the other end of the block in which Miss Wister lived.

A large furniture van stood in front of the door. A long table was on the sidewalk, standing parallel to the curb. Two men in overalls walked in and out of the house occasionally.

Astro looked at his watch. "About time for the show," he remarked. "How is Miss Wister standing the suspense?"

Valeska giggled. "I don't think she slept a wink last night, and when I got to her this morning she was almost frantic. I don't think that even now she considers herself safe. You see, she doesn't know you so well as I do. If you told me I was to be married today, I'd believe it!"

Astro turned to her with a sudden look in his eyes. "If I told you that you were to be married next month, would you believe it?" he demanded.

"Ah, but you're not going to tell me that!" said Valeska, putting away his hand gently. "But it was impossible to get Miss Wister to see the funny side of it all. I'm afraid that young Mr. Farralon is going to have a hard time getting some things into her head."

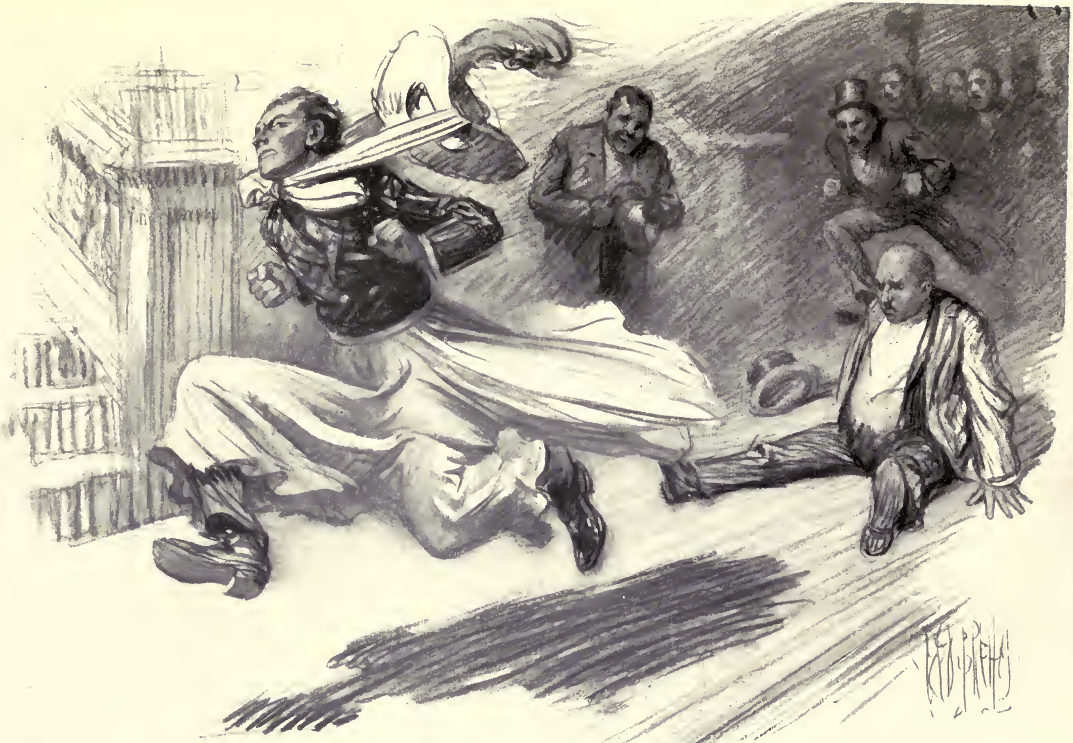
"Well, her heart is accessible, at any rate," Astro replied. His gaze returned to the window. "It's queer the Pi Rho Nu aren't here. We have mighty little time to get him ready. I believe they're going to wait till the last minute. No, by Jove! there they come now!" He rapped on the window sharply to the men on the sidewalk, who immediately put their hands to the table.

At the other end of the block, where a long awning stretched from the door of the Wister house to the sidewalk and a curious crowd had gathered, a large red automobile—number 11115—had stopped just as he spoke. It was full of men. One got out, then another, then another. As the fourth stepped on the sidewalk, however, there was a sudden commotion. A man dropped. Two others seemed fighting. They were joined by two more, who jumped from the car. Another dropped, and another, and then—

Sprinting down the block came a wild fantastic creature, half in man's clothes, half in woman's, with ribbons streaming, with short skirts flapping, fighting his way with excited gestures through the passers-by, knocking down several as he strove. Behind him instantly followed the crowd, led by the men who had risen to their feet. As the fugitive came up to the house where Astro and Valeska waited, the men on the sidewalk swung the long table round and the mob dashed against the barrier. One or two hurdled it; the rest ran round the ends. But the moment's handicap gave the fugitive just time to rush up the front steps and enter the doorway before the doors were closed and bolted behind him.

"Quick! Follow me!" exclaimed Astro. He could hardly speak from laughter; but the man followed him with curses, raving like a wild beast. Up three flights of stairs they raced, entered a small closet, and scrambled up a ladder.

"Now it's a plain track to the scuttle of the Wister house," said Astro. "You'll find a ladder three houses beyond here. You have just eight minutes to dress in. Your clothes are all laid out in Wister's room, and the



Sprinting down the block came a wild, fantastic figure

ring is in the pocket of your waistcoat. There'll be no best man. I'll wait here to make ready for your get-away."

"My get-away!" cried Farralon wildly. "For heaven's sake! isn't it over yet? Is there any more of this confounded practical joke?"

"More!" said Astro smiling. "You ought to know the capacity of the Pi Rho Nu. There's a hack covered with ribbons which I've had ready at the door, and there's a brass band and a demonstration waiting at the pier that will make you feel as if you were a crown prince."

Farralon wilted. "Well, I guess I'll get what's coming to me this time," he said, grinning feebly.

"No, you won't. You'll escape on Miss Wister's account. I've got it all fixed. As soon as you can, after the ceremony, you and your wife are to go up-stairs. Say you're going to leave in the cab at the door in half an hour and drive by way of the Christopher Street ferry to Hoboken. Then get up to the roof, come back here, just as you are, and I'll give you your instructions?"

"But my trunks, and Kitty's my clothes, and everything—"

"Everything is ready in that furniture van at the door. Now hurry! You've wasted two minutes!"

Farralon darted across the roof at reckless speed. Astro watched, with a lingering smile, till the groom disappeared over the edge of the roof of the third house beyond. Then he descended into the house again. Valeska was arranging a queer collection of clothes in a rear room up-stairs.

"Is everything ready?" he asked.

She burst out laughing. "There's a bride's going-away costume for you!" she exclaimed, holding up a blue gingham skirt, a purple-checked blouse, and a bandana kerchief.

"Well, be prepared for a quick change, then. I'll go to the roof and be ready to help the bride down."

Astro had begun to be anxious by the time the bridal couple reappeared. It was fully an hour before he saw the happy pair approach, clambering lightly over the roof. Then Farralon gave a whoop, and the two came up laughing.

They laughed as she stumbled down the ladder; they roared as—Astro with the bridegroom in the front room, and Valeska with the bride in the rear—the pair changed their clothes for the emigrant costumes that were ready. Then down-stairs they went, Astro carrying two large suit cases filled with the wedding clothes. At the door he stopped them and went to the window to reconnoiter. The Brigham automobile was still standing at the curb, near to the hack which was fairly white with ribbons and bridal flags.

"Take this chair now," said Astro.

Farralon took one end of a Morris chair and Mrs. Farralon the other. There was no one on the sidewalk at this end of the block, though a crowd was collected in front of the Wister residence, preparing for the fun of throwing rice and old shoes. The couple were unnoticed as they lifted the chair into the van and then climbed in themselves. The two teamsters followed with the suit cases, and in another minute the van was safely off. Astro and Valeska waved a discreet adieu behind the shutters of the empty house.

Astro took from his pocket a check for a thousand dollars and handed it to Valeska. "I think I deserve more credit than the clergyman," he said. "But now we must follow them and see how it all comes out."

The members of the Pi Rho Nu had hurried to the ferry as soon as the bridegroom's escape was suspected. They roamed all over the boat, passing the furniture van several times in their search.

As soon as the boat was in the slip the gay fraternity hurried to the pier where the *Carothian* lay with steam up. Here a brass band was in readiness to serenade the couple. The fraternity swarmed aboard the steamer and pushed their quest everywhere—save into the third-class cabin, where the bridal couple, disguised as steerage passengers, sat and laughed till the gangplank was raised. Then Astro and Valeska, near the baffled members of the crestfallen Pi Rho Nu, awaited the dénouement.

Just before the last line was cast off, the couple, dressed perfectly now, appeared at the rail of the promenade deck, waving their handkerchiefs merrily. A shout went up from the Pi Rho Nu.

Stringer, who was standing near Astro, turned to his companion. "Well," he said, "they fooled us, after all. But when he gets into his stateroom it'll look like a small grain elevator. There's a good ton of rice on the floor and in the mattresses. He'll get his on the way across! Hooray for the Pi Rho Nu!"

Valeska smiled as if she were pleased; and also as if she were a little envious, too.

THE LADY IN TAUPE

"EXCUSE me if I appear to patronize you," said the young man, "but you certainly are clever." He twisted up his blond mustache, nodded his head slowly, and smiled.

"My very dear sir," said Astro calmly, "what you call my cleverness is the product of innate gifts, years of study, and infinite thought and contemplation. *You* are the clever one."

"How so?" The palmist's client raised his eyebrows, as a woman might. His deep blue eyes sparkled, lighted with a strong sense of humor.

"Clever to have come here—for the purpose you did. I assure you that you could have found no better place, though I confess I shall be sorry to have my studio reproduced. I shall have to redecorate it."

"What do you think I came here for, then?" Some of the self-assurance had vanished from the young man's face.

Astro looked about calmly and pointed with the stem of his narghile as he spoke. "That granite Thoth could be easily imitated in papier-mâché. One can hire rugs, and pay for the rent by advertising on the program. There should be a door there, R. U. E., of course, and the divan should be brought down front so that your leading lady can sit on it and look up over her shoulder when her lover leans on the back of it. You can't escape that sort of love scene, you know, in a modern drama."

The young man laughed heartily. Then he said, "By Jove! you've struck it! I am an actor."

"No, you're not," said Astro. "You're a playwright, and a successful one."

The young man jumped up and banged his fist on the table. "What do you think of that!" he exclaimed.

Astro smiled cryptically. Then, "With considerable literary ambition, as well."

His client sat down again as suddenly, and stared at the Seer. "See here! I want to tell you something. I had no idea of coming to you for advice. All I wanted was local color, as you've discovered. I wanted hints as to setting, props, and business. I wanted a good characterization. And, by Jove! I wish you'd play my Granthope! But never mind that. I'd just like to ask you a question about a queer experience I've had lately. You've convinced me that you know some things."

Astro handed him a small silver box. "Have one of my cigarettes," he said. "There are not more than four or five hundred left in the world. They were given me by an army officer who once helped Diaz. Now go on with your story."

"My name is Pinkard, Lionel Pinkard," said the young man, "and, as you discovered, I am a playwright. I've written a book, too—that is, it's almost finished—and it's going to make a sensation—in more ways than one. Plays are all right for making money; but half the audience doesn't know or care who's the author. I confess I want fame. By Jove! that cigarette is sweet! A bit too mild, though, for me. Well,—

let's see,—it was after *A Run of Luck* was put on. I was working on *The Chameleon*—that was when I first saw the Lady in Taupe."

"The Lady in Taupe!" Astro repeated the phrase with humor.

"That's what I called her. She always used to wear that color—'taupe,' you know—a sort of purplish-gray, something like what they call 'London smoke,' only lighter. A gown with good lines, too. She always wore it, usually with black lynx furs."

"Where did you see her?"

"Everywhere; that's the funny part of it. This very day I saw her breakfasting at Mouquin's, at the next table. She's always near me. About two months ago she began. I say began, because it has happened too often to be accidental. She passed me in the street. Next day she stood on a corner waiting for a car. A mighty pretty girl, too—small head—you know how that makes a girl look taller and helps her figure; most women are built like dwarfs nowadays—deep brown eyes, a delicious mouth, and a touch of originality in her expression on account of a small scar on the left side of her chin. It's positively a beauty-spot, more like a dimple than a scar, and it crinkles up when she smiles. Well, I've run into her almost every day since then—and she's never moved an eyelash to show she recognized me. But she's up to something. She's always right in my way and never notices me. She's got me going, there's no doubt about that."

"Have you ever followed her?"

"Yes, I confess I've tried several times; but she has always given me the slip, or else I was clumsy."

"Well, what do you wish me to do about it?"

"I want to know what the lady's up to."

"That's simple enough. She wants to get an engagement."

"Why doesn't she ask me, then?"

"Ah, no doubt she will. She wants to make an impression, first. You know what a hard struggle it is for a girl without influence to get an engagement. She wants to get you curious, interested. I fancy she's heard you are to have a new play produced, and though the author doesn't always have much to say as to the cast, you are established and could probably help her."

"That's true enough. In my contracts I reserve a power of veto as to members of the cast, and I naturally have some weight, though there's a terrific amount of influence in these things. But it seems an elaborate method, I must say!"

"Well, I've heard of how the girls have to struggle. It strikes me she's clever. I'm curious to know what she will say when her time comes."

"So am I. I hope she'll spring her trap soon."

"And how is your book coming on?"

"Nearly finished. It's more or less of an exposé of society, and I hope will make talk. I'll send you a copy; that is, if your diagnosis proves correct in regard to the Lady in Taupe. If not, my dear Astro, I shall conclude you are merely a clever guesser."

The tone was such that Astro could not be offended at the banter. He rose smilingly to show Pinkard out. The young man gave Valeska, who was busy in the waiting-room, a sharp glance as he left.

"How did you know he was a playwright?" she asked the Master.

"I was in my laboratory when he came into the room, and watched him unobserved. He took in the whole studio at a glance, very interestedly. He went back to the door to get the effect as it would appear in a stage set, from the orchestra. He viewed it, as few do, as a whole, not in detail. Almost every one who enters inspects the curios and furnishings one by one. He summed up the general effect. By his appearance I knew him to be a man with brains. Few men of business can afford the time for a morning call, unless they wish some definite information. He had not the appearance of the idle rich; yet he was well-off. A literary man can use his inventive faculty not more than four hours a day without excessive fatigue; consequently he has time left in which to amuse himself. And finally, when he opened his coat for a pencil, I saw a typewritten manuscript in his inside pocket."

"He might have been an actor."

"It was not a part in a play that he had; they're bound up in smaller shape. Besides, he had none of the vanity of the actor. He was so sure of himself that he didn't feel the need of impressing any one."

"He might have been reading a play for a friend."

"The manuscript was full of pencil corrections. It was not a final draft, and would be almost undecipherable, except to the author. But, as far as that goes, almost every man who writes has an unfinished play up his sleeve. It was a safe guess."

"Well, what of the Lady in Taupe, then? I'm interested in her."

"What I surmised is probably true; but I suspect something deeper than that. It's a bit elaborate, as he said. It's a clever scheme, and may turn out to be still cleverer than it looks."

"I'd like to have a look at her. It takes a woman to read women."

"True. I believe it would be amusing to have you see her. The more I think of it, the more curious I am. I'll tell you. I'll ring Pinkard up and find out what he's going to do to-morrow."

He took up the telephone that evening and had a short conversation with the playwright. The next morning he said to Valeska:

"Pinkard will leave his house on West Seventy-fifth Street to-day at about ten o'clock, go to Dayton's office, lunch at the Grill Club, attend a rehearsal of his play *Wild-fire* at the Monster Theater in the afternoon, then go to the Park Riding Academy, dine at the Grill Club, and go to see Marlowe this evening at the Broadway. Knowing his itinerary, you can't miss him, and you'll probably see her, as she hasn't appeared for two days, and seldom misses it longer than that."

That evening Valeska returned with her report. "I saw her!" she exclaimed exultantly. "She's a beauty, too! I liked her at first sight. I followed him to Dayton's office, and she met him in Forty-second Street, almost the first thing."

"Where did she go?"

"That's the queer part of it. After she had passed him she waited on the corner of Forty-second and Broadway. An automobile came along with a lady in it—a really swell girl—stopped, and the Lady in Taupe got in. What do you think of that?"

"Number of the automobile?"

Valeska consulted a paper in her purse. "99,954."

Astro went into the little library in his waiting-room and took down the automobile list for the state of New York. He looked up the number, and then whistled softly. "Why, that was Helen Van Amsterdam!"

Valeska's eyebrows rose. "The heiress?"

"It must have been. That's the number of the Van Amsterdam's automobile, at least."

"Then I don't see why the Lady in Taupe should be looking for an engagement, if she has such rich friends."

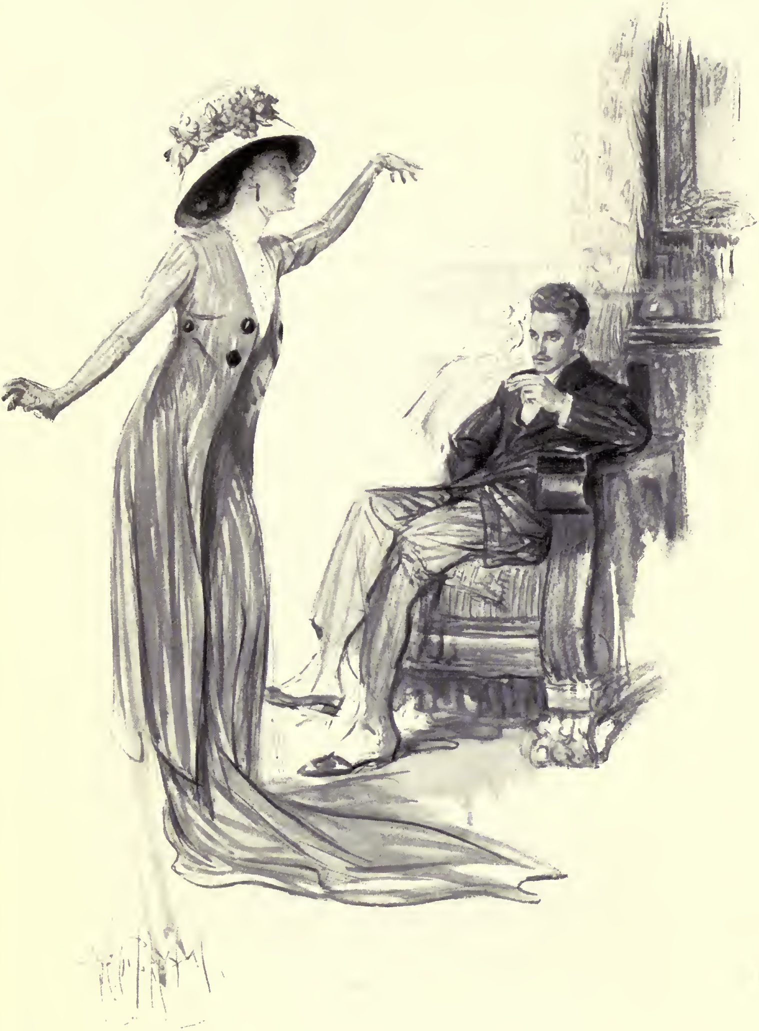
"Oh, that doesn't signify. But there's something queer about it. Well, we can't take any more time; I have too many important things to attend to. We'll just file that information for reference. We may hear from Pinkard again."

He did hear from Pinkard, in fact, within the week. The playwright came in one morning, as handsome, confident, and debonair as ever. He took a new critical look at the studio, then sat down as Astro came in, and said:

"Well, the Lady of Taupe has called on me at last!"

"Yes?"

"You were quite right—as far as you went. She wanted a part in the cast of *The Chameleon,* and waxed eloquent over her attempts to get an engagement. You should have heard her talk! That girl has magnetism, all right. She played as pretty a scene, for an hour, in my library as I've ever watched on the stage. She did imitations of Mansfield and Cissy Lof-



"She played as pretty a scene in my library as I've ever watched on the stage."

tus and Warfield and Barrymore; she told dramatic little stories; she discussed the psychology of audiences, the technique of the drama, and the very metaphysics of acting. I never heard such talk in my life; but—" He closed his eyes and smiled.

"Ah, but!" said Astro. "There was something else, then?"

"I should say so! After she had left, I went into my study, and found that it had been visited by burglars."

Astro betrayed no surprise; but his brows bent into a new tense curve. He leaned forward and looked at Pinkard intently. "And what was missing? Wait!" He suddenly raised a warning finger. "Don't tell me! I'll get it, perhaps—I have a feeling." He dropped his head into his hands for a few moments, then looked at Pinkard through half-shut eyes. "Not the manuscript of your new book?"

Pinkard slapped his hand on his knee. "By Jove! you've got it! See here, you'll have to take this on!"

"Anything else gone?"

"Nothing. I had a little safe in the wall, but it was untouched."

"A very pretty game, indeed."

"Wasn't it slick? Of course, she held me there while they worked it. I can't imagine how they ever got in, though. The back door shows no sign of having been forced, it was bolted on the inside. No fire-escapes available. It's a small apartment-house, and rather old-fashioned. But why any one should want that manuscript, I don't know."

"You have no other copy?"

"No, I wrote it on the typewriter myself, and was too lazy to make carbon copies. I haven't even my first draft of the thing. And I wouldn't attempt to rewrite it for all my hopes of fame and fortune! I'm no Carlyle. I've simply got to get it back! And there's no use going to the police for a thing like that, as you ought to know. If it isn't diamonds or money, they'll do nothing."

"Tell me something about the novel."

"Why, I hadn't decided upon a name yet; but it was by way of being a social satire. I've been about a good deal, you know, in New York, and know the fastest part of the smart set, and not a few of the others. It was pretty frank, an exposé, really, as I told you. Of course, I have toned it down in some places and raised things to a higher power in others. It's a bit sensational; but I've taken good care to change episodes and details so that no one of the characters could be identified. I'm not altogether a cad. But it's all true to life; what might happen any day in New York, and seen from the inside, too."

"How many people know that you were writing it?"

"Oh, I've made no secret of it. Any one who wanted to could have found out."

"Very well. I'll be up this afternoon to look about. The Lady in Taupe called in the evening, I take it?"

"Yes, at about eight o'clock. I'm seldom in at that hour. I can't imagine how she should know I was at home. Funny thing, too, I have almost always met her in the forenoon, usually within a half-hour of the time I left my flat."

"Did you promise her a place in *The Chameleon?*"

"Why, I said I'd do what I could. She interested me, and might go well for my heavy woman, though a bit too young. But of course, now, I'll see that she doesn't get in. It's not likely that she'll let me see her again, anyway."

"On the contrary," said Astro, "you'll see her as much as ever."

Astro and Valeska called at the Vanberg apartments that afternoon at three o'clock and went carefully over Pinkard's rooms. To Valeska's surprise, their call lasted only fifteen minutes, and then Astro, pleading another engagement, took his leave. She did not question him, being busy trying to puzzle out the mystery for herself; but, when he stopped at the front door down-stairs and rang the janitor's bell, she gave a little cry of triumph.

"Oh, I begin to see!" she exclaimed.

"I should hope so! It's too ridiculously simple. Half the flat burglaries in New York are done that way."

"But who helped? She couldn't do it alone."

"That's what we'll have to make sure of. I can only guess, just now. But here's the janitor. Have you any flats to rent in the building?"

The janitor looked them over before replying. "Well, there's a party wants to move out if she can find a good tenant to sublet to," he said.

"May we see the apartment?"

"She's not in, I think; but I guess it'll be all right. She's in a great hurry to rent, and I promised to help her. It's up on the third floor."

Valeska pressed Astro's arm in glee. Pinkard lived on the third floor! They were taken up, and the door unlocked.

"She's been here only a little while," said the janitor. "She didn't move in all her furniture; but you can get an idea what the place is like."

They walked rapidly through the place. Only one room was fitted up, and that but scantily, with only the requisites. The kitchen contained a few utensils, and it was evident that the occupant of the apartment took her meals outside. Astro walked to the dumb-waiter and lifted the sliding door. Opposite, only three feet away, was the corresponding door into Pinkard's kitchen. A glance at Valeska was hardly necessary. She nodded her head emphatically.

"Who lives here?" Astro asked.

"A Miss Demming. She's an actress, I hear. A pretty girl she is, too."

"Well, I'll come and see her. Much obliged, I'm sure."

"Do you think you will take it?" the janitor asked.

"I'm afraid it's too small," said the Seer, as they went out.

They were hesitating in the vestibule, and the janitor had left them, when Valeska exclaimed, "Why, there she is now!"

Astro looked out. A very pretty woman was walking toward them. By Pinkard's description alone he would have known her, even in her spring costume, for the Lady in Taupe. She held her head erect, ran up the steps, and, as they made way for her, entered the vestibule. Astro turned in time to see her open the letter-box of the third-floor suite. She took a key from her pocketbook, unlocked the door, and went upstairs without looking behind her.

"Which," said Astro, smiling, "explains how she is able to know so easily when Pinkard is at home, and when he leaves to walk abroad."

"And how the flat was entered while she held him spellbound with her talk," added Valeska.

"But *not* how she is able to afford an eighty-five-dollar a month flat when she's out of a job," Astro scowled.

"Nor who it was who climbed across the shaft, entered Pinkard's kitchen, and ransacked his study."

Astro finished, "For further particulars I think we'll have to apply to Miss Van Amsterdam."

"Oh!" said Valeska.

"I forgot to tell you that Pinkard was once engaged to Miss Van Amsterdam. She threw him over in a particularly nasty way two years ago, when she was engaged for a time to Count Vinola."

"How did you find that out?"

"The steward of the Grill Club owns a half interest in the Peerless Restaurant, though few of the members know it. I lunched there this noon, and gave him some tips on the stock market. Now that Mr. Calendon is a power in Wall Street, he doesn't forget his friends. The steward was duly grateful, and told me several interesting things. I shall cultivate him in the future."

"Ah!" Valeska looked up, smiling. "So Miss Van Amsterdam was afraid of being exposed in his book, was she? Well, I hope she'll read the manuscript quickly."

"Yes," said Astro, as they walked back to the studio, "I hardly think it will be necessary for us to do anything more. I venture to make a prophecy. The Lady in Taupe will call on Pinkard again within three days, and the manuscript will be returned. See if I'm not right. I'm going to write Pinkard to that effect to-night, and enclose my bill for one hundred dollars."

It was four days afterward when Pinkard made his third appearance at the studio, smiling broadly. "By Jove, Astro!" he said, "I wish really you'd tell me how you did it! I need it for my play. I'll swear it's too much for me!"

"Well, what happened?"

"I don't see why I need tell you, by Jove!" Pinkard shook his head. "You've certainly got your crystal ball well trained. I wish I could make my character Granthope as sensational as you are. I've got your studio all right; but I think I'll have to get you to take the part. You could make an audience believe anything. Of course I got the manuscript back, as you said I should."

"Is your play cast yet?"

Pinkard laughed outright. "Part of it. What do you think? We've signed the Lady in Taupe for the heavy woman, after all. She's an adventuress, all right! Talk about romance in every-day life! She made a grandstand play with me for fair!"

"Do tell me about it."

"Well, last night she turned up again, as bold as brass. I taxed her with being accessory to a felony, and she only laughed, by Jove! She swore it was all a joke, just to awaken my interest in her, and then she promised that the manuscript would be returned if I gave her a part. Well, the audacity of it tickled me just enough to accept. I wanted to see if it was a bluff. And what do you think? She said, as soon as I consented to the bargain, that I'd find the manuscript on my study table. I raced in immediately, and there it was! Here's your hundred dollars. You're a wizard. Sometimes I suspect that you were in cahoots with the Lady in Taupe and planned the whole thing yourself. But who on earth is she, anyway?"

Astro chuckled good-naturedly. "I'm not wise enough to know that. She is certainly clever, though. If you hadn't engaged her, I think I should."

"Well," said Pinkard, rising to take his leave, "there are tricks in all trades, they say. I won't inquire into yours; but if I want any more sleuthing done, I'll know where to go. I'll certainly send you a box for the opening night of *The Chameleon*. I'm going to rewrite that part for the Lady in Taupe, by Jove! It wasn't half good enough for her as it was."

"Well, Valeska," said Astro, "that proves again the value of a knowledge of human nature plus a friend 'below stairs.' I fancy Miss Van Amsterdam must have a rather guilty conscience to be so afraid of the revelations of Pinkard's book. She certainly secured a clever assistant in the Lady in Taupe. It must have cost nearly a thousand dollars to put that little game through. I'd rather like to know, though, whether it was the heiress herself who crawled through the door across the shaft. At any rate, it was lucky for Pinkard that he wasn't a cad, as he said. I'm afraid his book would have never seen the light, else."

Valeska placed her hand lightly on the Seer's shoulder. "But you didn't mean—I mean, you wouldn't *really* have engaged the Lady in Taupe as your assistant—would you?"

His answer was not in words; but Valeska was apparently satisfied. It was evident that she had no longer a fear of any such dilemma.

MRS. STELLERY'S LETTERS

"SHE must be a beautiful woman, Mrs. Stellery," said Astro.

Stellery looked a little embarrassed. He pulled his blond mustache thoughtfully. "Why—ah—yes; I used to think so, when I first marrried her. One gets used to a face, you know."

"I see. Still your wife must be charming. At least, her anonymous correspondent seems to think so. He is certainly very complimentary. See here," the Seer picked up one of the letters from the bunch on the table, opened it, and read aloud:

> "It may sound banal to say you're pretty, and yet every woman likes to know that she is. You're far more; you have an original type of beauty. One watches for your smile, hoping it will come soon. And that constellation of dimples in your cheeks!"

Stellery laughed faintly. "Just about the way I used to talk," he acknowledged. "When I first courted her I was quite poetical about those dimples,—named every one after a different star, I believe. Queer this chap has picked up the same idea, though."

It was on Astro's lips to say that the simile was as old as woman's love and man's, but he did not. He turned to another letter, typewritten like the other.

> "You're like a little gray mouse. I wonder if there is any lurking devil in you for me to evoke? With your gray eyes you look so demure! Are you really as quiet as you seem? I'd like to have a talk with you alone and see!"

"She has a devil in her, all right," remarked Stellery, "and a delicious enough one, too! Oh, she can be charming, that mouse! It's very evident that the fellow who's writing these letters doesn't know her very well. That's one satisfaction."

Astro took up one more.

> "I saw you at the opera last night. You had more style, more apparent culture, more caste, than any woman in the house. Once you looked full at me, and I wondered what it would seem like to have a wife like you. To own you, and be owned by so wonderful a creature! How proud I'd be!"

"I remember that night. Mrs. Stellery does look well when she's dressed up. But curse such audacity! Writing to my wife like that! It's an outrage, by Jove! You'll see why I don't care to go to the police with these letters. But they must be stopped, and I must find out who's doing it!"

"How long has this thing been going on?"

"For two months, now. I have a bunch more of 'em at home that my wife gave me."

The letters on the table were all written on telegraph blanks and enclosed in government-stamped envelopes.

"All typewritten like these?"

"No; the first ones were crudely printed in pencil, as if a child had done them."

"And all of them complimentary?"

"Every one of them."

"How often do they come?"

"Every two or three days. Mrs. Stellery has been away visiting in Philadelphia the last three weeks, and they followed her down there. She brought back a whole lot of them to show to me."

"Did she show you the first one when it came?"

Mr. Stellery considered the question a little.

"No, not for some time; not till she had received several, in fact. At first she didn't want to worry me, she said; then she decided that I ought to know about them, anyway. Some of the first ones were left in the letter-box, but most of them have been sent through the mails."

"Does Mrs. Stellery seem to be much worried at receiving them?"

"Decidedly. Of course, it isn't as if they were as unpleasant as anonymous letters sometimes are. But she didn't want me to go to you about them, and thought that they'd stop coming after a while. In point of fact she hasn't had any this week; but I want to find out who's responsible for them; and, from what I've heard of you, you're the one to do it."

"I see." Astro let his chin fall into his palms and stared at the table in silence for some time.

Stellery walked up and down, examining the furnishings of the studio. He picked up a gold stiletto and fingered it, walked to the wall and looked at an antique bit of tapestry, smiled at Astro's white lizard in its cage, and returned to the Seer, who looked up to say:

"It's queer that a man who professes to admire her so much doesn't have the courage to tell her so, isn't it?" He watched Stellery between half-closed lids.

"You don't know her. My wife is a very proud woman. She'd not stand for it a minute, I'm sure of that. This chap has some romantic notion, or he wants to make trouble. It seems to me the letters are a bit too literary in style, as if he were used to composition. And what he says is true, too! How does he know my wife has dimples in her shoulders, by Jove? How does he know how she looks in an Egyptian scarf? She hasn't worn one since her honeymoon when I got one in Cairo. Why, I might have written those letters myself! Little intimate details that make my blood boil to think of another man's knowing! Little tricks she has I didn't think any one else had ever noticed! It's amazing!"

"Are you home much of the time?" Astro asked, stacking the letters into a pile on the table.

"Not much; that is, until lately. I'm a busy man, and when I'm at home I try to get rid of some of my outside work. I have a den down next to my library, and often spend the whole evening there. I've been trying to get together a lot of information on the history of Wall Street coups, and it takes about all my spare time. All the relaxation I get, really, is in bridge at the Percentage Club. Why?" He stopped and darted a look at Astro.

"Oh, I only wondered how much time your wife had to herself."

Stellery wheeled on him. "See here! I hope that's no insinuation! My wife is above suspicion, you understand that! Good lord! why should she show me these letters, if she weren't?"

"Oh, my dear sir," said Astro suavely, "don't take it that way! I was wondering if any one were watching her, following her. Nevertheless, I should like to know, also, just whom she sees, and where, and how. You have given me a difficult task, Mr. Stellery, and you must forgive me if I seem curious. But I presume I shall get it all better in my own way. You don't mind my calling on Mrs. Stellery, I imagine?"

"Why, of course not. She'll be glad to see you, I suppose. But, of course, it's a delicate matter, and she's naturally sensitive."

"Very good." Astro rose, tall and distinguished. A veil seemed to be drawn before his eyes, masking all expression; as if, having learned all he could of his client, he was anxious to be alone to solve the problem.

Stellery seemed to feel the change of atmosphere. He reached for his hat, shook hands, and left the studio.

"How do you diagnose him, Valeska?" Astro asked his assistant, who had overheard the talk.

"A clever man, absorbed in business, a bit cruel, or at least inclined to be cold and unsympathetic, and yet honorable and loyal at heart. I'd hate to be in love with him! He'd make me suffer. And you?"

Astro smiled cryptically. "You work from your feelings; I from my facts," he said. "Fortunately, we often come out in the same place. But, speaking of facts, try and see what you can make of these letters. It's an amusing complication, and a new variation of the anonymous letter."

Valeska sat down and looked over the pile. As she examined them one by one and threw them into a heap to begin over again, she kept up a running commentary. "Mostly stamped at the Madison Square branch post-office. A few at Station E—that's on West Thirty-second Street, isn't it? One or two at Times Square branch, and one at Station I, One Hundred and Fifth Street. All but that one mailed in the early afternoon. Written on a Rem-Smith typewriter; a pretty old one, I should say, for the alignment is bad. All the small "o's" register below the line, and all the capital "N's" above it. And I should say that the writer is not in love with her; only pretending."

"How do you make that out?" Astro smiled curiously.

"I can feel it."

"Too literary?"

"Oh, I can't explain it. Only, I know if I got letters like this I'd throw them in the fire. 'Your gracile hands!'—bosh!"

"Yes, I noticed 'gracile.' It seems to be his pet word. Also 'jimp.' Queer love-letters—I agree with you."

"Love-letters! They're deeper than that!"

"You're right, and there is small possibility of finding the author unless we discover the motive first. There are thousands of persons who might write these letters. What I have to decide is, why should any one of them do it? It may be a mere practical joke. If that's so, it would be done by some one who can watch the effect upon her. In any case, I take it that it must be some one who knows her. What good could it do a stranger?"

"What good could it do a friend or an acquaintance?"

"Flatter a woman with all sorts of intimate original compliments,—not spoken, so that she would have to blush, deny, and reprove; but written, so that she could read and reread them in secret as often as she liked,—arouse her curiosity, a powerful ally; her sense of the romantic, a still stronger one, and finally unmask yourself as the adorer;—I don't know that it's so bad a way, after all."

"Unless you try it on a woman who shows all the letters to her husband," said Valeska dryly.

"Yes; but how's the writer to know she will? He's probably conceited enough to think she won't."

"There's one other way of discovering the writer,—find a Rem-Smith typewriter with an alignment imperfect in just this way."

"Yes," said Astro. "We might begin and fine-tooth-comb the city for it. Still, accidents do happen, luckily for prophets and seers. And, at any rate, that will be the final proof. Well, I'm going to reread the whole bunch, look for some unifying theory—and then call on the lady. I confess I'm curious to see her."

Mrs. Stellery, he was to find, was a woman of by no means an obvious type. Outwardly, it is true, she manifested social grace and experience, was handsome rather than beautiful, with a dark serious face and finely-chiseled features. One would call her aristocratic in looks and manner, and yet behind the conventional aspects in which she showed herself in company, a keen observer would note subtlety after subtlety. That she had a fine mind and a fearless one, was occasionally proved by the flashes of wit and perspicacity that illumined her conversation and colored what might otherwise be a rather bored and repressed, though perfectly polite habit of talk. She seemed aloof, waiting for something interesting, all but effete. Her smile was elusive; but, when it came forth, compelling, captivating, and as soon as it had created that impression, it faded and the weary manner asserted itself again. Only the mouth was temperamental. The gray eyes were well schooled, though velvety soft. She had a trick of half raising one eyebrow, which gave a whimsical relief to her haughty pose. One could fancy her always playing a part and wonder what the real woman would be like. Not very different from other women, after all, if one judged by the quivering lips.

This, at least, is the way Astro described the woman to Valeska later. He was waiting in the reception-room, looking at a novel entitled *The Guerdon,* when Mrs. Stellery entered, one brow delicately arched, as if she had not been quite sure whom she was to find.

He introduced himself, and for a moment she seemed embarrassed and turned the conversation to the novel.

"Have you read it?" she asked. "I met the author. Mr. Askerson, lately in Philadelphia at a dinner, and he sent me the book. I saw him only twice; but he seemed quite an extraordinary man."

Astro turned to the title page, and before finding it noticed the inscription on the fly-leaf, "Viola Stellery: Her Book," a quaint-enough wording to arouse his smile. "A problem?" he asked.

"Love after marriage—the modern theme," she replied.

"I'd like to know his solution."

She merely smiled. It was her only smile during the interview, and the talk passed to the letters.

She had no idea, she said, why she was being so persecuted. The letters were stupid, and apparently meaningless, yet they annoyed her. Their audacity had now begun to worry her, as well. If anything could be done to stop them, she would be glad. Yes, they had ceased coming, for the time being, and perhaps it would be as well to wait and do nothing; but now Mr. Stellery himself was aroused and wished the matter investigated. He was too busy with his press of work to spend much time on the matter. He was a very busy man. Quite absorbed in his work—and she had hoped to go abroad with him in the spring. At present it seemed impossible. And so on the talk ran, while her expression said, "What are you going to do about it? I don't care!"

Then a card was brought in, and she said, "It is Doctor Primfield, my husband's brother-in-law, you know. Married Paul's sister, who died two years ago. He's a physician. We see a good deal of him."

She did not add, "and he bores me"; but the merest drag in her words implied it. In another minute the doctor came bruskly in.

He was a nervous, slim, snapping-eyed man of thirty-five, with a jerky way of speaking and moving. He said, "Hello, Lila!" shook hands, bowed to Astro, and looked at him with a professional eye, seemed to decide that the palmist was all right, flapped himself into a seat, screwed his feet round the legs of a chair, and began to talk very fast to his hostess, ignoring Astro.

Mrs. Stellery endeavored to include both guests in the conversation but found it difficult. Astro, seeing that he was in the way, at least of the doctor, withdrew and went back to his studio.

On the way he stopped at a bookstore and bought a copy of *The Guerdon.* Dipping into it, walking down Fifth Avenue, he came across a sentence, reread it, shut the book with a snap, and walked home thinking.

Arrived at the studio, he laid the book open at the page he had read, before Valeska.

" 'She laid her soft gracile hands, palms down, on the table,' " she read aloud, and looked up. "Did you find 'jimp', too?"

"You'll have to read the book and see," was his answer. And then he described the interview. "If you find 'jimp' and 'nuance,'—for there are several 'nuances' in the letters,—I think it would be well for you to apply to Askerson for a position as secretary. Only on the chance, a slim enough one,—but all we have at present. But Stellery is right; the letters *do* sound literary, though Mrs. Stellery is wrong—they are by no means stupid. If I could only think of a motive for a man like Askerson doing such a sentimental thing!"

"He might want to see what she'd do, and use the episode in fiction."

"Yes, that's the trouble. Men have many motives, and often several at a time, really mixed. Women seldom act except with a single definite motive, no matter how they conceal it or even pretend to themselves that it's different. I wonder if the author could possibly be Doctor Primfield."

"Why Doctor Primfield more than another?"

Astro laughed. "There doesn't seem to be any other, yet; and there was something queer in the way he looked at her."

"How did he look at her?"

"This way."

But Valeska, seeing too well what was in his eyes, turned away her own. "Well, I'll read the book," she remarked, leaving.

"And I'll read the letters again."

There were, Valeska found, three "graciles," one "jimp," and two "nuances" in Askerson's novel. In connection with their recurrence in the letters, the coincidence might mean anything or nothing. What was more important was to get a sample of Askerson's typewriting; and to this end Valeska, in the guise of a stenographer in search of work, visited him.

She found Askerson to be the farthest removed from her preconceived idea of a novelist. He was a short, round, and chubby, seraphic-looking young man, with light curly hair and the mien of a preternaturally solemn child. His earnestness seemed absurd masquerading in this juvenile guise; but, once that inconsistency was forgotten, under the spell of his mental power, she found him a most interesting man. He was in the midst of his work, dressed in a pink silk shirt and white duck trousers, his hair a mass of light wavy locks over his eyes, smoking a brier pipe.

He assured her that, though he would like to employ a secretary, he could not afford it. Besides, he was engaged in dramatizing *The Guerdon,* and had to work it out himself on his machine, inch by inch.

He had to refuse her request; but seemed willing to talk.

Valeska had prepared for the interview by reading everything of Askerson's that she could find. Among other books, she had discovered a slim book of poems, privately printed during his college days. As a last resort, she used this, hoping to play upon the vanity of the poet in him.

"I heard a girl once recite one of your poems; *Sea Magic,* I think it was called. Do you know where I could get a copy of it?"

He seemed pleased. "I didn't know any one remembered that verse," he said. "It's one of my favorites. If you'll wait, I'll see if I can remember it. I'll typewrite it for you, if you like." He sat down to his machine, puckered his brows, and began to write. He paused once in a while in search of a phrase, which he usually found by a hard glare at the ceiling, and finally finished it and presented her with the sheet.

"Would you mind signing it?" she asked timidly.

He put his name and a flourish at the bottom of the page.

She could scarcely wait till she was in the car to examine the printing. The small "o's" registered a little below the lines; but the capital "N's" were in true alignment.

Astro shrugged his shoulders when he saw it, and pointed silently with the stem of his narghile to the word "gracile" in the last stanza.

Two days after that, a hasty summons came from Stellery over the telephone, at four in the afternoon.

He wished Astro to come immediately to the house; but did not care to tell, over the wire, why he was needed.

Astro took a taxicab and went up-town immediately. He found the broker in his den, writing at a big table covered with sheets of paper. On a smaller table stood his typewriter, a sheet, half written, sticking from the roller.

Stellery looked up with a worried expression. "Take a seat," he said. "I want your advice; or, rather, your help. Things have come to a crisis. Brush those papers on the floor anywhere."

As Astro sat down, he noticed a waste-paper basket behind him, a little to the left. As he seated himself, he pushed his chair back a foot or so, so that the basket was within easy reach.

Stellery took a letter from his pocket and passed it over. "Here's what came yesterday," he said.

Astro opened it and read:

> "I simply can't wait any longer! I must see you! You must know, by this time, how madly I am in love with you. I don't dare to speak to you face to face, unless I receive some encouragement. But I want to end this suspense immediately and know my fate! Will you meet me to-morrow afternoon, at six o'clock, at the prescription counter of the Times Square drug store? If you'll be there and will let me speak to you for only five minutes, please leave a candle lighted in the window of your room to-night between ten and eleven o'clock."

"Well, did she light the signal?" said Astro handing back the letter.

Stellery frowned and nodded. "See here, you can imagine how I must feel to have this sort of thing going on!" he said. "And it's enough to make me fairly sick! But I want to trap that man and find out who he is. That's why I sent for you. Mrs. Stellery objected very strongly to lending herself to the scheme in any way. It was all I could do to get her to light the candle; in fact, I had to do that myself. But, after talking it over, and deciding that there was after all no real danger of her compromising herself, she consented to be at the rendezvous this evening at six o'clock. She doesn't seem to be curious—the thing disgusts her—but she wants to put an end to the matter. Of course I can't be seen there, or he'd never appear at all. That's what makes me wild. I'd like to go down and punch that chap's head! Instead, I've got to stay here and wait. I want you to follow her down—nobody will know you have anything to do with it, of course—and find out who it is, if it's some one she doesn't know. Then we'll put that chap in jail, if it's a possible thing!"

He had worked himself into a passion as he talked, and, rising and gesticulating, walked back and forth in the little room.

Astro watched his chance, and, when Stellery's back was turned, reached into the waste-paper basket, drew out a sheet of typewritten paper, crumpled it up in his hand, and slid it into his pocket.

"Is Mrs. Stellery at home?" he asked.

"No; she had an appointment this afternoon. But she'll be at the drug store at six, she promised."

"I wish I had known this before," said Astro. "I should have liked to have my assistant with me."

"I've been trying to get you on the 'phone all day. But, in point of fact, though Mrs. Stellery consented to the signal, I had to argue with her all this morning to get her to meet this man. You can imagine how I feel! I wonder if I've done wrong? Can you fancy how it feels to send your wife to a rendezvous to meet an anonymous correspondent? By Jove! I didn't know how much I loved her, before! You know, I've neglected her shamefully, I suppose. I've been absorbed in my work, and that's why this sort of thing has been possible. I suppose people have seen her going about alone, and have thought perhaps we were estranged, even. And every thing this damned scoundrel has been writing her is true, by Jove. She *is* charming, you can see that! She's one of ten thousand, that woman! I ought to know. Now, at the faintest prospect of losing her, absurd as that chance is—why, I'm fairly crazy about her. If I saw that man with her, I don't care who he is, I believe I'd kill him!"

"Which is another reason for your not going," said Astro, rising. "There must be no scene. You can trust Mrs. Stellery to make the talk brief and forcible enough, and, in any case, you may depend on me to protect her."

It was nearly a quarter to six before he reached Times Square. He entered the building and started down-stairs toward the subway entrance on his way to the drug store below the street, when a man brushed past him, almost jostling him off the step in his haste. The man looked round to apologize; it was Doctor Primfield.

"Oh, I beg your pardon!" he said, and looked at Astro queerly. "Haven't I met you somewhere?" he added.

Astro recalled the meeting but did not mention his own name.

The doctor appeared to be a little embarrassed. "I've got to catch a subway train; so you'll have to excuse me," he said. "Otherwise, I'd like to have a talk. I have some theories of my own about capillary markings on the fingers I'd like to discuss with you. Good day!" and he was off like a busy squirrel. As he passed the drug-store entrance Astro noticed that he gave a swift, apparently uneasy look inside.

Mrs. Stellery, however, had not yet appeared; but at a few minutes before six she walked in the door, handed a prescription to the clerk at the desk, and seated herself without appearing to recognize the Seer, who lounged at a counter some distance away. She was beautifully dressed in the prevalent mode, and sat like a fashion-plate, without expression on her proud face, as if bored to death.

Six o'clock struck, and no one approached her. Fifteen minutes went by, and still she sat, calm and haughty, in her place. Finally, when the prescription was handed her, she walked over to Astro and bowed coldly.

"Do you think it will be any use waiting longer?" she asked.

"Not the slightest," was his reply. "No one will come, I am quite sure."

She looked up at him with a sudden keen expression. "You are sure?" she repeated.

"Quite so, Mrs. Stellery. May I escort you home?"

When they arrived, the servant who opened the door put a note into Mrs. Stellery's hand, saying that it had been delivered by a messenger boy. She tore it open, read it, and passed it to Astro:

> "It was, of course, impossible for me to speak to you, as you were watched."

The next day, as Astro and Valeska were driving up-town, returning from a case that was then puzzling him, he proposed that they rest at Sherry's and take tea there. It was not yet four o'clock, and there was no one else in the room when they entered. Tea, muffins, and jam had hardly been ordered, however, when Valeska suddenly exclaimed:

"Why, there's Mr. Askerson now!"

"And there's Mrs. Stellery as well!" Astro added.

Master and assistant gave each other a quick glance, then turned to the approaching couple. They were earnestly conversing, and did not, apparently, notice that there was any one else in the room as they walked across to the opposite side and sat down. Then Mrs. Stellery cast her gray eyes slowly about the room and met Astro's. He and Valeska could see the color mantle her cheeks as she turned away. Askerson was slower at perceiving who was present; but when at last he noticed Valeska, he turned suddenly and said something to Mrs. Stellery. The latter was too well-bred to turn; perhaps she was too busy in attempting to mask her thoughts in her haughty cold expression. They did not look over again.

"Well, if Mr. Askerson *has* written those letters, it's about time for him to explain now," said Valeska. "I think he's dear! But why should he take such an elaborate method of making love to her when he can meet her like this whenever he wants to?"

"Perhaps he can't."

"There's no reason why he shouldn't, is there? It's all right."

"Do you think he wrote them?"

"I don't know. If it hadn't been for your meeting Doctor Primfield, I'd be surer. Askerson's typewriter leaves it in doubt.

"Oh, the typewriter, we agreed, was only the final test. What you must seek is a motive."

"Well, then, Askerson is romantic—and a bit afraid of her. Doctor Primfield is practical; but afraid of her husband. Either may be in love with her."

"I don't think you have proved a sufficient motive yet for so extraordinary a course. But, by Jove! look at that! If there isn't Primfield himself!"

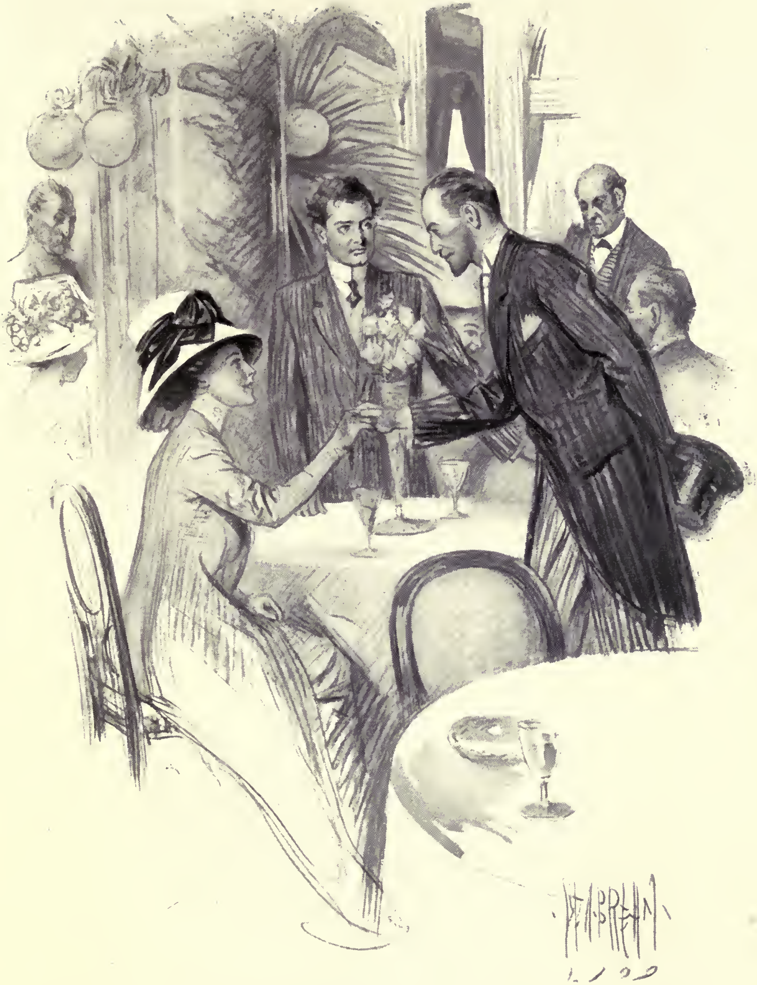
It was Primfield, indeed, who entered at that moment, looked about, caught sight of Mrs. Stellery, walked over to her table, and spoke. She reached out her hand and smiled faintly. There were a few words of introduction, and he sat down at their table and lighted a cigarette.

"Now," said Astro, "you have a chance to vindicate your woman's perception. Watch and see which of those two men is in love with her."

Valeska narrowed her eyes and watched. It was five minutes before she said deliberately, "I think neither of them is."

Astro laughed softly. "Well, my dear, I have a better motive than you have yet discovered."

"What is it?" she asked eagerly.



" Watch and see which of those two men is in love with her."

"I won't tell you yet; I'll give you a chance to think it over by yourself. But at ten o'clock to-morrow morning the writer of the Stellery anonymous letters will walk into my studio."

At ten next morning Valeska came swiftly into the laboratory where Astro was experimenting with phosphorescent sulfid of calcium screens. The sight of her face made the Seer smile, it was so puzzled in its expression.

"Mrs. Stellery is here. She says you wished to see her. Are you going to have her meet the author of the letters?"

"Yes," he answered, putting down a varnish brush. "And if you want enlightenment on human nature, I advise you to listen in the anteroom."

He took a piece of crumpled paper covered with typewriting from his pocket and handed it to her. She looked at it carefully; then, as she stood for a moment staring at him, her face changed.

"Oh!" she breathed, and walked rapidly back to the reception-room.

Mrs. Stellery was waiting for him, standing beside the granite Thoth in the center of the studio. Her eyes were fixed blankly; but at his coming she turned a white face suddenly to him.

"You said that you had discovered the authorship of the letters," she said, and her voice was very low. "I'm anxious about it. Do you really know? Are you sure?"

He nodded gravely, motioned her to a seat, and sat down himself. "My dear Mrs. Stellery," he began, "I want you to trust implicitly in my tact and my consideration. I shall do nothing whatever without your consent, you may be sure. Indeed, it was to ask your advice that I sent for you."

She continued staring at him anxiously, and her lips formed the words, "My husband!"

"Mr. Stellery shall know—only what you please to tell him yourself," he answered.

"Then you *do* know!" Her lips were trembling.

"It was my business to find out."

"Who wrote them, then?" she demanded almost fiercely, as if defying him.

"Mrs. Stellery," he replied, "you are a clever woman. Not only that, but you have a profound knowledge of men. And you have a heart that, in its danger, knows how to ally itself with your brain."

"You mean—"

"That you wrote them yourself!"

For a few minutes no one would have recognized her for the proud serene woman of the world. A strong effort of her will brought her back to something like composure; but now she must talk.

"If you knew what I have suffered!" she exclaimed. "We have been growing away from each other for a year. If it had been only a quarrel, we might have made it up; but this was only his carelessness, his absorption in his business, his thoughtless cruelty. I wanted to arouse him, rekindle his interest in me, make him love me again, if I could. Oh! can't you see? It may not have been right—it was a deceit, I know—but I missed him so!"

"My dear Mrs. Stellery, you needn't justify yourself to me. All I need to say is that I'm sure your ruse has worked."

"Oh, I know it has! But I had some good advice, —it wasn't all sheer woman's wit—Mr. Askerson helped me. I don't know how I came to confide in him—I've seen him so few times—but he wrote most of the letters for me, and I copied them; so they would seem more like a man's letters, you know. But I confess—I don't know what you'll think of my praising myself so—all those intimate personal things were truly my own. Most of them my husband had said to me during our honeymoon. I thought they would be most likely to arouse his jealousy."

"Oh, he's jealous enough," said Astro. "You needn't fear that you haven't succeeded. He has threatened to kill the writer of the letters."

She smiled wistfully. "Well, I hope he won't kill *me* when he finds out I'm the one. And that's the question! I always expected to tell him; but now I'm afraid to. I didn't quite intend to let it go so far, and I don't know how to explain. What shall I do?" She looked up at him with tears in her eyes. There was no haughtiness left, now.

"I think you needn't worry," said Astro, giving her his hand in sympathy; "for I met Mr. Stellery this morning on his way to the office. He told me that he intended to take you abroad immediately. That, he said, would stop this nonsense and give him a chance to get acquainted with you all over again. He said he was sure you had been left alone too much."

"Really?" she said, suddenly smiling. "Oh, then, I'm sure the letters will stop! And," she added softly, "when I've quite won him back, and we're happy again, I'll confess everything." She paused a moment, then spoke as if to herself. "There's a little canal in Venice

I love. It's called the Rio Margherita. I think it will be there—in June—just after sunset."

She looked up wistfully as she added, "Oh, I do hope he'll forgive me for being such a schemer!"

BLACK LIGHT

SURELY it had been a curious wooing; for Astro, Seer of Secrets, so confident in other matters, so keen in his insight into human nature, so quick to think and bold to act, had shown from the first a strange timidity when it came to a personal relation with Valeska, his assistant. His manner had long been merely brotherly, modified only by his relation as instructor to her. But of late he had begun to make tentative suggestions, as if to try and sound her affection. From these Valeska had instinctively warned him off, and his tact had made him accede to her wishes. It seemed as if he feared to lose her by speaking too soon.

But at last he had spoken. The words had sprung unpremeditated from his lips, on the surging impulse of the moment. Nor were they the fruit of any dramatic moment. Merely the sight of her in a characteristic attitude at the table, her blond head illumined by the electric light, and a sudden terror struck him lest destiny should sweep them apart and write the story of their two years' friendship in the chronicles of the past. So many things in his life had faded like autumn leaves! He *must* be sure of her, sure of having her beside him always, sure of the inspiration of her companionship. The speech came on the instant in a passionate demand.

It had appeared to frighten her for the moment, as if it were a question she had long been dreading. She had asked for time in which to consider it, and he had reluctantly consented. Since then he had not mentioned the subject; but he had watched her silently with fear and constraint in his manner.

Valeska found it hard to explain why she had been unwilling to answer; but, as she went over and over the question, it seemed to her that their friendship had been merely the product of propinquity. They had been thrown together continually, had incurred danger, and had enjoyed victory. How, then, could she be sure that it was no more than friendship, a common interest in their work? Love, she had always thought, should come with a flash of sudden illumination, as a divine gift, as a sudden wonder, convincing in its very mystery. But her feeling—was it not the mere result of a daily comradeship? Was it a fatal irresistible appeal of the soul? She found him aristocratic, generous, talented, finely perceptive, and delicate; but was this all? Her love, if it were love, spoke a commonplace tongue—and she had wanted words of fire. So, for a week, she went over and over the subject, subjecting herself and Astro to a searching criticism, and as yet she had found no answer.

He came into the room one morning, carrying from his laboratory a large black square object, which he set on the table. She looked at it, and then her eyes questioned him.

"It is a lantern of a special kind," he said. "It casts black light."

"Black light!" Her delicate brows rose.

"That's what Doctor Le Bon calls it. You see, the visible spectrum (or all the light we can see) is only about one per cent. of all the vibrant energy emitted by the sun or any other luminous body. Beyond that visible spectrum lie, at one end the ultraviolet rays, and at the other the infra-red. I have here a lighted lantern enclosed in an opaque box, which cuts off all the visible rays, but permits the other ninety-nine per cent. to pass through. The flame inside is now casting rays of black light through the opaque sides,—black, because they are invisible; light, because they will illuminate certain objects.

"I want you to witness an experiment. You recall the celebrated interference experiment of Fresnel, in which light added to light produced darkness? Well, I shall show you how darkness added to darkness may give birth to light. It is Le Bon's discovery. Now come into my dark room, and I'll show it to you."

At the farther end of the laboratory he opened a door which led into a small dark room. Entering this, and closing the laboratory door, he opened one into another dark room beyond, carrying the dark lantern. They both entered the inner dark room, which was ventilated through a circuitous light-proof pipe. The room was absolutely black; but Astro, well used to the place, feeling his way with his hands, set the lantern on a table.

"Upon a shelf here," he said, "is a Chinese image of Buddha, which some weeks ago I coated with phosphorescent sulfid of calcium. By this time all its luminosity is gone, and it is absolutely invisible. But now I shall direct the invisible rays of black light from this lantern upon it. Watch!"

As she waited there in the silence and the dark, Valeska strained her eyes for nearly a minute in vain. Then a faint luminous blur was apparent. It gathered intensity and showed a triangle of violet radiance. In another minute it had taken the form of a squatting Buddha and glowed plainly, the only visible thing in the room.

"It's wonderful!" she breathed.

"Oh, that's not half that can be done with black light," Astro said, as he took the lantern and led the way out. "With it one can photograph objects through an opaque screen, when they are illuminated by ordinary sunlight. By using a screen of sulfid of zinc, and training this black light upon an object, one could see it even at midnight, half a mile away."

When they came out into the great studio, he dropped to his favorite place on the divan and went on. "Phosphorescence, opalescence and fluorescence are queer things, Valeska. They haven't been half understood till lately, when what is called 'the new physics' came into being through the discoveries in radioactivity by Monsieur and Madame Curie. It used to be thought that after a phosphorescent object had remained in the dark for a while and had ceased to be luminous, it ceased its radioactivity, and needed a new bath of light to make it act again. But Le Bon found that it would radiate for months after all visible glow had disappeared. We have proved it with this black light just now."

He had taken up his narghile and sat looking off into space with a mystic expression on his face. It was one of his dreamy. philosophical moments. Valeska recognized the mood and waited for the inevitable parable. For, to Astro the Seer, modern science was but an allegory of the intellect and the emotions. By it he explained even his own charlatanry.

"Isn't it like absence? While our friend is present, he is bathed in the matter-of-fact light of day; he is radiant, luminous. When he disappears, for a time that impression of him lasts, like the phosphorescent glow. Then, the light fades and we begin to forget,—all save those who truly love, who truly know, whose soul can still perceive the mysterious astral black light he radiates through the dark. His influence persists, transmuted from mental into psychic energy. *Selah!*"

He dropped his narghile and sat with folded hands, looking at her as if she were miles away. His smile was the calm expression of his own bronze Buddha.

But Valeska took the parable to herself eagerly. "Yes, yes, it's true, and that's just what I need to know before I give you the answer you want! I don't know whether I *really* love you or not,—you're too near me, too intermingled with my life and my work. If I could try that test of absence, if I could wait till your phosphorescence fades out, then I could tell whether or not I was affected by your black light. I'd know then just *what* you were to me—alone in the dark!"

"Shall we try it?" he asked gently. "Shall I disappear for a week, say?"

"Ah, I'm afraid it would take at least a month!" she said.

He laughed. "Well, as long as you like."

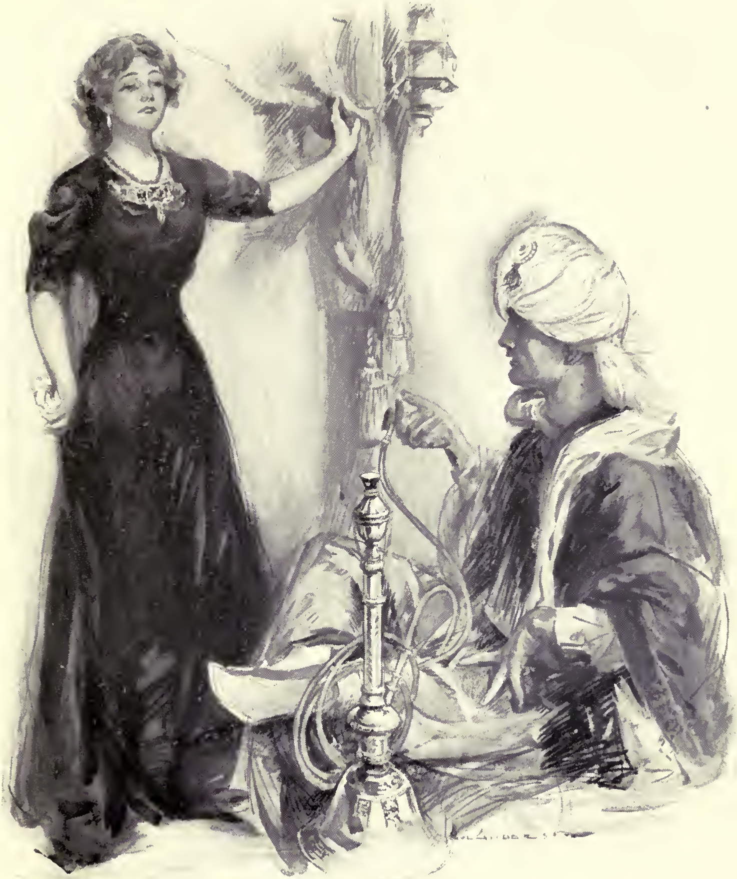
"Will you really?"

He bowed gravely. "I shall disappear to-morrow. You may use the studio as you please; and, when you've found out whether or not you can be affected by my psychic black light,—you will let me know."

"Do I care? Do I care enough for him?" Valeska asked herself the next morning as she walked to the studio. She had thought of it almost all night; she had risen with the question on her lips. She had seen him every day for two years. The thought that to-day, and perhaps for a week or a month, she would not see him, gave her a strange feeling. Was it a relief, or a pain? As yet, she could not decide.

As she entered the studio it seemed strange not to find him there, at first. Then, insensibly she began to find it hard to believe that he was *not* there. Everything suggested his presence,—the curiosities he had collected, the weapons, the Egyptian sculptures, tapestries, gems,—all evidences of his taste and his researches. She could not rid herself of the feeling that at any moment he might come in. He was near her, somewhere, waiting and watching for her.

But this, she said to herself, was only the effect of the familiar environment in which she had been used to see him. But it became at last too strong, too insistent. Surely she could never decide till she sought a new atmosphere. She was sorry that she had not disappeared, instead of Astro. But at least she could leave the studio and be alone for a while, to think it out. As she opened the outer door, she heard the soft ringing of the electric bell in the studio which warned them of visitors. It still rang as she closed the door, and it gave her an uncanny feeling,—the one spark of life in that dead empty place. She hurried away and walked swiftly toward the park.



"Shall we try it?" he asked gently. "Shall I disappear for a week, say?"

"Do I care?" Valeska had little doubt of it when the next morning she walked to the studio. One day had made her sure. She wanted to see Astro again more than she wanted anything in the world! The day before had been empty and vapid. She had scarcely reached the reservoir in the park before she knew what a fool she had been ever to doubt. The product of mere propinquity or not, the feeling she had for him was paramount over every other emotion. She wanted him back, to see him, hear him, and—well, he would find out what else!

Again the empty studio smote her with the strange feeling that, despite the fact that she did not meet him there, he was near her. Now it was a tantalizing thought. Why had she not arranged how to notify him? She had been so sure she would need a month that she had not asked where he was going, and she had now no means of letting him know. It was absurd! Must she wait for him to write?

After all, had she really no means of discovering his whereabouts? She looked eagerly about the studio. For two years she had been his assistant in unraveling mysteries. Why should she not now profit by her apprenticeship? But how?

It came to her then that it was, so to speak, by means of black light that he himself had always worked. Most people saw only the outward and visible signs,—the one per cent. of facts that were luminous and obvious. His delicate mind registered the infra-red rays of psychic action. He vibrated to the ultraviolet waves. Could she not do so as well? She was a woman and had intuitions as well as intellect; she had emotions finer than men's. But her emotions told her somehow, irrationally, that Astro was still there in the studio. She could not believe, quite, in his absence. Everything shrieked his name to her. She could close her eyes and see him before the porphyry sphinx, examining thumb prints at his table, poring over the mimic planets of the orrery, figuring out nativities, gazing into his crystal ball.

That would never do! She must keep her imagination as an instrument with which to work on facts. Where, then, were the facts that could help her? She set herself to investigate the studio thoroughly, inch by inch.

At the first round, she found nothing not in its accustomed place, nothing new, nothing significant. She sat down at his table to think, putting her elbows on the blotter and letting her head drop into her palms. Her eyes fell on the blue blotter. It was changed every morning, ordinarily; but now she noticed pencil markings,—a small square drawn with its diagonals. Would this be mere thoughtless penciling, or perhaps a clue? Next, an envelope lying beside the inkstand attracted her attention. Surely that could mean nothing, and yet, as it lay with its face down, the X shaped cross of its gummed edges suggested the diagonals of the square. Either one alone might have no significance; but the two taken together—the hint, perhaps, repeated? She smiled at the very absurdity of so frail a clue.

Then her eyes dropped to the waste-paper basket. This should have been emptied yesterday morning, yet it contained a few scraps of paper. She stooped and drew them out, one by one. Three were blank. On the fourth she found the following:

"St. Patrick's Cath. . . . . . . 115 10th-Ave.
Pier 83 N. R. . . . . 320 3d-Ave."

She gave a little cry of triumph. Here at last was something to work on! She considered the addresses carefully. What did they mean? Astro had never mentioned such places; yet the notes were in his crabbed handwriting. She knew of a certainty that the studio had been cleaned the day before yesterday. This writing, then, must have been put into the basket after they had had their talk. If so, then they meant something. The first thing to do was, of course, to look up these localities and see what she could find there. Saint Patrick's Cathedral and the Pier 83 seemed unlikely places to discover news of Astro's whereabouts; but she determined to visit all four before she returned.

She called a taxicab and set out first for Pier 83. This, she found, was at the end of the Forty-second-Street side of the Weehawken ferry. She walked along the wharf, and found a tug laid up there. Besides this, there was no sign of life. What should she do? Ask the tugboat men if they knew where Astro was? That was nonsense! She walked up and down for a half-hour, and discovered nothing which she could possibly twist into evidence. She decided, then, that she would visit the other places, and then, if she found nothing suspicious, return over the ground again.

Saint Patrick's Cathedral next. There it stood, on the corner of the avenue, and she recalled how Astro had once called her attention to its resemblance to a vast Gothic rabbit. The two transepts did resemble a bunny's haunches, and the front towers were like ears. She smiled at the thought; but got no nearer Astro by the pleasantry. She walked inside, sat down on a seat, and thought. What associations could this have with his whereabouts? Why, he was not even a Catholic! He always said he was a Buddhist. Well, if this were a part of the black light his memory emanated, it was black indeed!

In Third Avenue her hopes went up. Number 320 was the entrance to a brick apartment-house. There was a sign indicating that flats were to let, and she rang for the janitor. By him she was shown a very pleasant "four rooms and bath", whose windows were on a level with the elevated railroad; but it was as bare as the palm of one's hand, with no lines she could read. She asked tentatively of the other occupants, and found that all, with the exception of a couple of old men, were married families. Yes, a man had been to look at the flat yesterday; but he had worn a beard. Was this a disguise? But if Astro had come there with the intention of renting a flat temporarily, why should he have left the address in the waste basket? And, moreover, why should he have coupled its address with Pier 83?

There remained only the Tenth Avenue address, and this she found to be a huge unoccupied building with shuttered windows, belonging to a gas company. Opposite was a vacant lot piled with lumber refuse, beams and timbers; on the other side was the gas-tank's cylindrical bulk. She could find no watchman to give her permission to enter. What pretext could she give for wanting to see the premises, even if she inquired at the office on Eighteenth Street? She could think of none. Better think it over and plan a campaign. She had this much information, at least. Now what she had to do was to find some plausible theory to utilize it.

Back she went to her room and cried herself to sleep, as any other woman would. She missed Astro more than ever. Before, she had a hunger and thirst for his presence; now she wanted his help and protection. Oh, she was sure enough, now! She felt lost without him; she saw how necessary he was to her, how he had made life different, romantic, picturesque.

It was a sad little Valeska that crept to the studio next day. She took up one of the cushions of his divan and kissed it passionately, buried her face in it for a while, then sat resolutely down at his desk to work out the mystery of his location. The more she thought of it now, the surer she became that he must have left these clues on purpose to guide her in her search. It would be like him to test her that way; there was a sort of humor in it that, at last, she saw. Well, then, she would be a worthy pupil. She would prove that his lessons had not been without effect. She, too, would be a seer of secrets!

With a smile on her lips now, she began the problem. But again she stopped. It was absurd to think of him as being away. She was so used to seeing him here in the studio that she could not take her task seriously. Could not she go into a trance, as he had so often pretended to, and summon him to her, or project her spirit to meet his? Could she not perceive the radiance of his secret black light directly through her intuitions, without this tedious and stupid analytical logical process? As she sat there she could almost feel him at her side, leaning over her shoulder, looking from the door of his laboratory. She looked up with a start from her reverie, and was a little frightened to find herself alone in the great studio with its shadowy corners. Then she went back conscientiously to her study.

What was the meaning of the four addresses? It seemed evident that he could not be in any one of the places; that would be too easy an explanation of the mystery. Was there any esoteric significance to the Weehawken ferry or Pier 83? She laughed at the idea. All she could gather from the addresses was that Astro was probably in New York. Well, that was something. Her mind jumped to the square with diagonals, to the cross on the envelope. How did *they* fit in? Why, for all she knew, the pattern on the carpet, or the legs of the chairs could solve the mystery!

No, there must be *some* relationship between these things. If these evidences were left purposely, they were correlated one to another. Her mind went back to memories of Astro. He used to jump up and walk back and forth as he considered his problems. So up rose Valeska and began to pace the room.

As she passed the book-shelves, she noticed that one book stuck out a little from the others. It was a volume of Poe's *Tales*. She pushed it back and continued her promenade. She went over the addresses again,—Saint Patrick's, Pier 83, 320 Third Avenue, the gas works. It came to her vaguely that these places were about equal distances apart. Now could *that* mean anything? Then she thought that she could consider them more clearly if she had a map.

She went to the shelf, therefore, took down and unfolded a large map of New York, and laid it on the table. She next took four pins and marked each place. They were indeed equal distances apart; she measured them with a ruler. Then she noticed that they seemed to form a square, and tested it with a little transparent celluloid triangle Astro used for plotting horoscopes, and found it was true. The sides were about a mile and a quarter long. Again she dropped her chin on her palms and her elbows on the table and studied the pins.

But her thoughts wandered. It seemed as if Astro should be there to help her as he always had. She thought, with a smile, that if it were propinquity that had made her love him, propinquity was what she wanted most. But she forced her mind to the subject and remembered the diagram drawn on the blotter of the table. Why, *that* was a square, too! And it had its diagonals drawn. The hint reached her at last and, seizing a pencil and ruler, she drew in the diagonals on the map, and looked curiously to see where they intersected. On Thirty-fourth Street, between Seventh and Eighth Avenues. But the studio itself was at 234 West Thirty-fourth Street.

She jumped up, then, her hand on her beating heart. Her intuitions, then, were true! She had felt the black light of his presence, though he was invisible! He was in the studio, and had been from the first! He had, perhaps, even looked from the doorway, as she had fancied. She trembled as if at the presence of a ghost, and feared to see him.

But where was he? Must she look in every nook and corner? Should she call him out loud? Hungry for him as she was, she could not yet do that; her heart beat too fast. Yet she longed to tear the mystery open and let in the light again—the old-fashioned sunlight of his actual visible presence—and break into tears on his shoulder. She moved across the room on tiptoe now, as if she were guilty of some crime in being there, threw herself on the divan, and tried to think it out.

As she calmed herself, the thought of the book she had replaced on the shelf came to her, and she ran across the studio to take it from its shelf. It fell open of itself to *The Purloined Letter*, and she smiled to herself. That proved her hypothesis to be right. Was not the purloined letter concealed in plain sight, so prominently placed that it escaped the search? Then Astro's hiding-place would be as obvious, if she reasoned aright. Could she solve that as she had solved the other, by her intuitions, by means of his black light?

Black light! The very words were enough to tell her. Where should he be, but in the dark room where she first witnessed his experiment, where the little phosphorescent Buddha, though invisible in the dark, still radiated its mysterious waves of energy?

So it was solved! She hugged herself with delight, and smiled at the prettiness of his plans. How well he knew her and her mental processes—indeed, he must know her very soul, to be so sure of her and her ways! Indeed, he was the Seer of secrets; for he had seen hers before she had discovered it for herself, had waited with patience and tact till she should know and be sure of her own love for him. A wave of impatience to see him, speak to him, touch him, swept over her.

Of course he had retreated to his hiding-place when he had heard the ringing of the bell on the door. She had been there for an hour, and he must be tired of waiting there, well ventilated as the dark room was. So she crossed to the laboratory door, opened the door of the little anteroom, shut it behind her, and put her hand to the inner door, opened it, and listened.

It was black and still. For a moment she almost fainted with the fear that, after all, she might be mistaken and he was not there. Her childhood's terror of the dark returned; but she put it away and tried to speak aloud. Her voice came thin and small in that closed space.

"Astro, I have found you!" she said tremblingly. "I have seen your black light in the dark, and I know, now! I want you, dear!"

She gave a little cry as she felt two arms take her in their grasp. Then the touch of his lips thrilled her, and she laid her head on his shoulder in peace and contentment.

When Astro took her out into the light, it blinded them with sunshine so that they staggered and could hardly see.

The thrilling of the electric bell interrupted them in their dream.

"It is the clergyman and the witnesses," said Astro, smiling. "They are just five minutes ahead of time. I didn't expect you'd find me till eleven o'clock at least!"

THE END

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